

SLAYERS

17 *THE LONG ROAD HOME*



BY HAJIME KANZAKA
ILLUSTRATIONS BY RUI ARAIZUMI



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“Hiya!
Sorry for
the fuss!
Call me
Ran!”

Slayers 17
THE LONG ROAD HOME





Kicking up a powerful wind and cutting through the cloud came a spreading pair of giant wings! Wait, that's—

“A dragon?!”

He was right... It was a pitch-black dragon! I'd seen my share of dragons, and this one was definitely on the larger side.

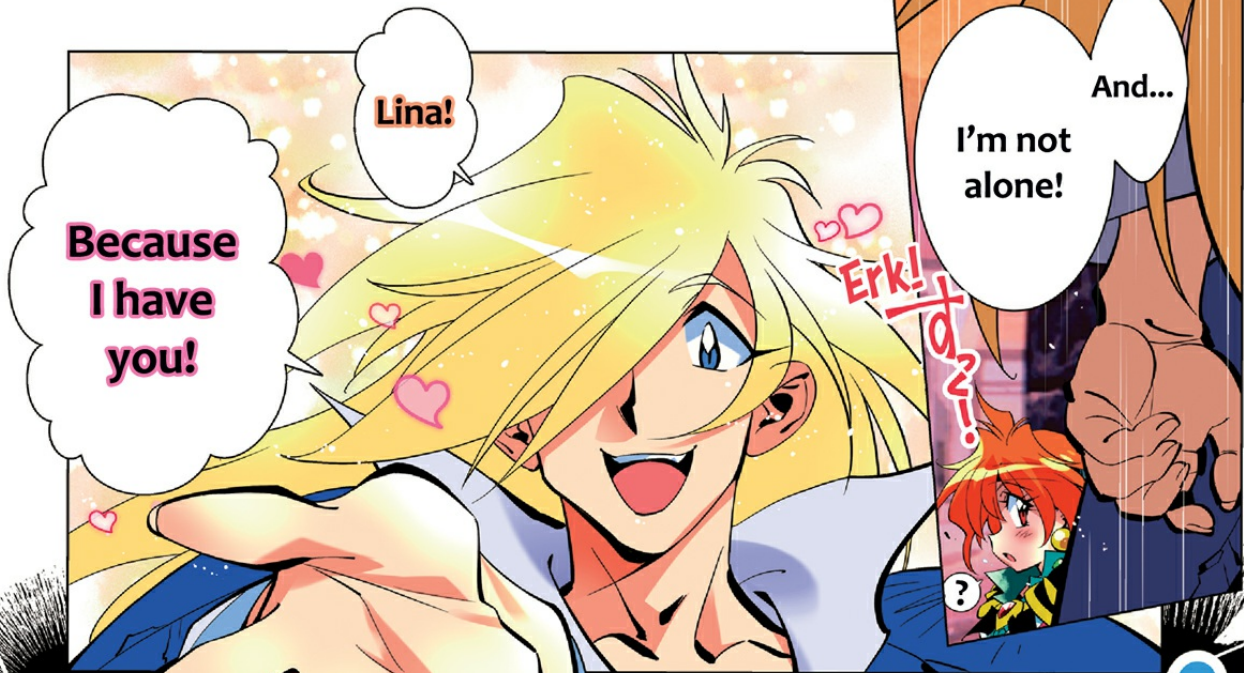


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1: Suddenly, I Found Myself in an Unfamiliar Town

Suddenly, I found myself in an unfamiliar town.

“Huh?” I grunted in dumbstruck surprise.

Buildings lined the thoroughfare, dotted by stalls and shops. People were coming and going. Wagons rattled along, their wheels kicking up dust clouds.

But it was all wrong. The architecture. The color and feel of the stalls. Even the designs and patterns of the clothes people were wearing. None of it was familiar to me.

That said... judging by the blatant stares we were getting from passersby, it felt more like *we* were the ones who were out of place. I couldn't grok what about us seemed so strange, though.

I wore a shortsword on my belt and my entire outfit was peppered with jeweled amulets, but I was primarily dressed in a black cape and bandanna. I kinda stood out in such a bright and cheery place—or maybe brought it down—but that's basically standard issue for a sorcerer.

Meanwhile, my companion was tall, blond, and handsome. Gourry didn't exactly have the typical rough-and-tumble appearance of a swordsman, but his light mail and longsword were pretty on point.

Something beyond that must have pegged us as outsiders.

“Say, Lina... just throwing this out there...” Gourry muttered softly. “But is this not Latka City?”

“I was just wondering the same thing,” I replied, staring out into space.

“No, this *is* Latka.” An accented, aged voice behind us caused us to turn around. There sat an old man on a bench in front of a residence. “Very sorry to eavesdrop, but this is indeed Latka City. And who might you be, travelers? Your outfits are curious, and you seemed to appear out of nowhere. Whence have you come?”

“Whence...?” *From Latka City, of course*—or so I was about to say, but I stopped myself. It was the truth, of course, but, to be more precise, Gourry and I had left Latka City for an unknown destination before winding up here.

See, it’d all started earlier that afternoon...

Guuulp—hack-ack! Augh! Hack! I forced myself to swallow my juice instead of spitting it out, leading to a massive coughing fit.

“Whoa! You okay, Lina?” Gourry asked.

It took a good while and a good bit of sputtering before I could respond, but I eventually got the words out. “Ah, I’m... f-fine!” I said before turning to the elderly shop owner. “Anyway, sir!”

The big lug and I were currently in Latka, a town close to Zephyr City, the capital of Zephilia. We’d arrived just before noon with the intent to make it another couple of towns down the road before getting lodging for the night. We were just stopping in for an early lunch.

Since it was still technically morning, however, the eatery we’d ducked into was practically deserted. So, apparently with nothing better to do, the proprietor had decided to chat with us while we ate. I mostly let his spiel go in one ear and out the other... until a seemingly innocuous comment had led me to my whole near-choking debacle.

“So, let me get this straight...” I began. “A wanderer just waltzed into town and settled in at the mayor’s place?”

“Yep,” the eatery owner confirmed.

“And the mayor’s whole family’s been acting weird since then?”

“Yep.”

“And what did you say this wanderer’s name was again?”

“Norst,” the old man filled in.

“Hrmmmmm...” So I’d heard him right after all.

“Ring a bell, Lina?” Gourry asked.

“Sort of. Maybe. Could just be my imagination, but...” I replied vaguely. I didn’t have much to go on, and what I *did* have was the thinnest of gruel. More of a paranoid daydream. A total “boy, would it suck if I’m right” kind of thing. But if there was any chance my speculation *was* correct, it was a portent of really-not-good stuff to come.

A stranger cozies up to some VIP, and soon after, said VIP starts acting funny. That sort of intrigue was common enough. My gut reaction was that I had no obligation to stick my neck out over it—as ignoble a thought as that was, and despite the likelihood that it’d eventually spark some conflict, big or small, if I let it be.

And yet... It was one thing when intrigue was the machination of a vengeful, greedy, or power-hungry human. But what if it was a demon?

Demons were creatures that sought the destruction of the world. The mortal enemies of all living beings. Their leader was Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu, who was served by five lieutenants: Hellmaster, Dynast, Greater Beast, Deep Sea, and Chaos Dragon. Each of these lieutenants, in turn, had between one and four high-ranked demons known as Priests and Generals doing their dirty work.

Now, to most folks, this was all the stuff of legends. Some people didn’t believe they even really existed. But I, personally, had had no shortage of run-ins with their ilk.

One such run-in had been with a demon named Sherra, the General in service to Dynast. Over the course of our conflict, I’d learned that Dynast had three other Priest-slash-General underlings whose names were all derivative of his—Dynast Graushera. Apparently this was because Graushera saw his underlings as sacrificial pawns who weren’t worth the effort of a creative naming scheme.

So, dear reader... Do you see where I’m going with all this? I knew there were high-ranking demons out there with names akin to “Dai,” “Nast,” “Grau,” and “Sherra,” and I’d just heard there was some dude named Norst making things weird in town. That’s not too much of a stretch from “Nast,” now is it?

Plus, while lower-ranked demons took on easily identifiable monstrous forms, higher-ranked ones could appear indistinguishable from humans. That meant it was entirely possible for a powerful enough demon to take human form and

infiltrate a city in the interest of some scheme or other.

Of course, there was the possibility that I was overthinking things. Maybe it was pure coincidence this wanderer had such a suspicious name. But then again, what if I looked the other way and happened to be right after all? What if it led to something even worse down the line? I was sure I'd regret not nipping it in the bud.

Moreover, Latka was close to my hometown. They were literally hitting me where I lived. And so...

"Could you tell me where to find this Norst fellow, sir?" I had to ask.

Ordinary—that was the only way to describe Latka City. Maybe the locals would object to that description, but if you asked ten travelers, I'd wager seven or eight would tell you the same.

Buildings lined the thoroughfare, dotted by stalls and shops. People were coming and going. Wagons rattled along, their wheels kicking up dust clouds.

We'd hit the center of town with the main road cutting through it. The mayor's house was tucked away just beyond. It was a big house, though not so big I'd call it a mansion, surrounded by a low hedge with a nicely tended lawn.

So, how am I gonna approach this? While I stood outside the front door, thinking...

"Say, Lina," piped up Gourry, who'd heretofore been silent.

"Yeah?"

"What are we doing here, exactly?"

"Oh." *That's right. I forgot to fill him in. Maybe I should... Eh, nah.* I knew there was no point in explaining things to Gourry, the master of playing dumb even about stuff he definitely knew. So I simply responded lightly, "I'm just... investigating a hunch."

"Huh."

No follow-up? Score! Normally I would have teased him about that, but no-questions-asked Gourry made things a lot easier in the moment. But just then...

“Can I help you?” A figure appeared from behind one of the trees on the lawn—an older fellow dressed in the dirty overalls, straw hat, and work gloves of a gardener. I assumed he’d been working and had only just noticed us.

“Ah, I’m a traveling sorcerer named Lina. I heard Norst was staying here, and I was wondering if he might be a guy I know,” I said, lying my pants off.

“I see.” The gardener nodded in understanding. “I should take you to meet him, then. Come along.” And with that, he headed for the door.

Wuh? I’d assumed this guy was a gardener, but given the way he spoke... Either way, knowing it would seem suspicious if I backed out now, I followed after him. “Um, are you...”

“The master of this house, yes.”

“Wait, you’re the mayor?!”

“That’s the natural conclusion, isn’t it?”

“Well... thank you for your help, Mr. Mayor,” I said, panicking internally.

Were we going to meet Norst *right that second*? It’d be all well and good if he turned out to be just some random guy. But... what if I was right and he was one of Dynast’s direct subordinates? It was just me and Gourry right now—we didn’t have the crew we’d had when tangling with Sherra before. I was also down the magic-boosting I’d had back then, which put a serious crimp in the strength and variety of spells I could use. If this turned into a fight, I wasn’t so sure we could win. The best I could hope for now was sizing up Norst, then playing dumb and getting the heck outta there.

The mayor guided us to a parlor on one side of the entrance hall. “If you’d be so kind, please wait right here,” he said, then walked away.

The parlor wasn’t particularly fancy in terms of decor, but it was plenty spacious. It hosted a big table and a set of sofas. The room looked like it could comfortably sit ten or more people, easy.

Gourry and I took a seat on a sofa and waited as instructed... until the door opened with a clack.

“Excuse me.” The man who entered appeared to be in his thirties. He was tall

and wiry, with artlessly arranged hair of a very dark brown that fell just past his shoulders. He wore a moss green robe embroidered with gold thread, which seemed to hang off his frame at least one size too big.

Gourry and I stood up from the sofa to greet him.

The man regarded us with vague confusion. “I am Norst, a guest in this home,” he said as he closed the door behind him. “The mayor said you might be an acquaintance of mine, but... Lita, was it? I’m not sure I’ve had the pleasure.”

Lita? The mayor must’ve gotten my name wrong... Whatever. I had bigger fish to fry. To be honest, I hadn’t expected to get right to a face-to-face meeting so quickly. *How to broach the subject, then?*

“Er, it’s more a friend-of-a-friend situation, really...” I bluffed, thinking on my feet. “But I’m not entirely sure of the connection just yet myself.”

“Oh? And what might this mutual friend’s name be?” he asked.

I forced my voice to remain casual. “Sherra.”

As soon as I said that, the door behind Norst warped with a crack.

I gasped in shock as the door, made of a series of interwoven and intricately decorated panels, began twisting in a spiral and breaking apart until it went from being an identifiable object to a mere abstract pattern that soon spread to the walls, ceiling, and floor. At the same time, the walls also began to retreat into the distance. The next thing I knew, the table and sofas had disappeared, opening up a space between us and Norst. The walls continued to move so far away that I could no longer see them, leaving Gourry and me facing off against Norst in a vast space made up of only floor and ceiling.

“I see,” Norst said, a half-smile forming on his lips.

Right to it, huh?! I figured we would’ve had a little more back-and-forth to feel each other out, so this development really took me by surprise. Also, it probably goes without saying, but no human sorcerer could do something like that without at least a chant first. I’d all but confirmed his identity—which was well and good, but how the heck was I supposed to get out of this now?! Openly panicking here would be like admitting I didn’t have a plan.

Instead, I looked around me with a studied indifference. “Huh... Some kind of barrier?”

Norst snorted. “You seem awfully unperturbed. I assumed I’d have to cut off any possible route of escape, which is why I created a place that... isn’t.”

“A place that *isn’t*?”

“Yes. We are currently everywhere and nowhere at once. Which means the outside cannot influence us, nor can we influence the outside. You can’t run your way out of here, and there are no entrances or exits to flee to anyway. Plus, if you defeat me, it *will* undo the spell, but there’s no guarantee you’ll be returned to where you came from. The nature of being everywhere and nowhere at once means that when the spell is undone, you could end up on some distant mountain, in an unfamiliar city, or even over the ocean. Of course, that’s provided you *can* defeat me.”

Boy, that’s annoying... Long story short, it was basically impossible to escape unless he let us go.

“Now, you said you knew Sherra. From where, exactly?” Norst asked.

“Before I tell you, mind confirming something for me? You’re a General or Priest of Dynast’s, aren’t you?”

“You knew that and you still came to confront me, eh?” Norst said with a thin smile. “Impressive mettle. You’re right. I am Norst, General of the Dynast. What do you want of me?” The hostility flowing from him expanded around us like sediment.



Okay, yeah, the sitch was looking pretty darn grim. *What's my next move?*

"What now, Lina?! He's really raring to go!" Gourry said nervously. And when he did...

"Lina?" Norst parroted with a scowl. "I thought it was Lita."

"The mayor just got her name wrong!" Gourry shouted.

"Wait..." Norst thought a moment, then looked back at me in shock. "Are you Lina Inverse?!"

So not good! If he could put that together just by my first name and the fact that I knew Sherra, he had to know exactly who I was—someone with massive demon beef. If just hearing Sherra's name spoken had been enough to make this guy throw away all pretense and trap us in this weird barrier thing, there was no way he was gonna let me go now that he'd realized who I was. And of course, there was also no way at this point I could just say "sorry, mistaken identity."

How to get out, then? Before I could think of something... Norst sprang into action. Gourry and I braced ourselves for battle!

Except Norst's big move turned out to be kneeling down in place, planting his hands on the floor, and screaming, "You gotta be kidding me!" His voice was chagrined. "There's no way! No! Freaking! Way! All right, get a load of this! Yes, I do some evil! I *am* a demon, after all! A General, no less... It's not like I have quotas, but I *do* have my rank and reputation to think of! I can't just stand around doing nothing! So here I am, laying the most basic of basic groundwork, not even actually doing anything yet. And just as I'm starting to consider doing a teeny-tiny little bit of bad stuff, suddenly there's a knock at my door! 'Hello! Lina Inverse here to kick your ass if you don't mind!' Can you freaking believe it?! This is the absolute worst!"

Uh... I didn't quite know what to say. That certainly wasn't exactly the reaction I was expecting, especially from a high-ranked demon. I had to entertain the possibility it was some ruse to get me off guard... right?

Since I had to be ready to chant a spell at any time, Gourry spoke in my place. "Is Lina famous among you guys or something?"

“Huh?!” Norst looked up, slightly irked. “Is Lina *famous* among us?!” He sounded almost offended. “She defeated the incarnation of our Dark Lord, then took the Great One into her body and defeated Lord Hellmaster without any harm coming to her! Then she vanquished Lord Dynast and defeated *yet another* incarnation of our Dark Lord! What idiot *doesn’t* know her?! You think we demons have no sense of self-preservation?! That we never share information?!”

Apparently my fights with demons were paying dividends. Of course, when you lined them all up like that, it was hard to deny that—while luck definitely played a huge part in it all—I really had done a number on the demons, huh?

“Yes, she’s famous! Infamous, even! She’s a harbinger of doom to demonkind! The Demon Slayer herself! Demons step past out of clear revulsion!”

“Clear revulsion?!” I found myself shouting. I’d heard that said about me vis-a-vis dragons, but *demons*?

“Clear revulsion!” Norst insisted, puffing out his chest for some reason. “See, there are some demons who think we should have our revenge on you. But some of us in the more high-ranking set, myself included, feel like going out of our way to take a shot at you would just mean heavier losses! It’s better just to avoid you altogether.”

“So... you don’t want to fight her?” Gourry asked.

“Of course not!” Norst responded furiously. “If you ask me, it’s not even a simple matter of strength! We demons are just a bad match-up for the being known as Lina Inverse!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I growled, unable to help feeling a little offended.

“There are those who believe that because the Great One briefly inhabited your body, some measure of that power still lingers within you... But what about everything *before* then, eh? The only answer is that you have some inexplicable quality—some kind of predestination or property that neither human nor demon logic can quantify! How are we to fight something as nebulous as that?! I say we can’t, so the best policy is to steer clear! Yet here

you are! Right! Freaking! Here! No warning, no rhyme, no reason! You just bust down my door, happy as you please! What the hell am I supposed to do with that?!” After screaming his throat out, Norst suddenly straightened up and bowed low to us. “So I’m begging of you, spare me. Just this once! Please!”

“Um...” How was I supposed to respond to a demon so powerful that I wasn’t sure I could beat him with an entire army *and* a gang of sorcerers treating me like a litigious unsatisfied customer?

He seemed to take my lack of response as dissatisfaction and quickly spoke up again. “I know! How about this?! I’ll send you safe and sound to Latka, and I’ll willingly pack up and leave town! And on top of that, I promise not to lay a hand on humans for five—no, ten years! In exchange, you let me leave without a fight, and if we do happen to pass each other in some other city somewhere, we’ll both just look the other way! We won’t even make eye contact!”

He committed to that compromise all on his own. *Just how scared of me is this guy?* It was starting to get on my nerves, but I wasn’t inclined to press the issue. Insisting on a fight would be the opposite of what I’d hoped to achieve here, after all. “Okay. Agreed.”

“Hooray!” Norst exclaimed with an exaggerated expression of relief and a celebratory pose.

Grr...

“I’d better get while the getting’s good, then...”

“You’re one to talk about ‘good,’” I snarked.

Ignoring my snide comment, Norst... didn’t move, exactly, although he’d clearly done *something*, because the countless patterns swirling on the ceiling and floor began to rise before me until they consumed my vision entirely.

The next thing I knew, Gourry and I found ourselves in an unfamiliar town.

The wind blew. Wagons rattled along...

“Now...” I thought for a minute, then spoke back to the old man on the bench. “This isn’t the Latka that’s close to Zephyr City, is it?”

“Zephyr? Where’s that?” he replied.

Hoo boy... “Pray tell, then, what kingdom are we in right now?!”

“What kingdom?” The old man furrowed his brow in confusion. “This has always been the domain of Luzilte.”

That name didn’t ring a bell. A minor member of the Alliance of Coastal Nations, perhaps?

“Man... he really got us,” I said, scratching my head.

“What do you mean?” Gourry asked.

“Norst tricked us,” I explained knowingly. “He shunted us from his nowhere-space into a totally different city!”

“But... didn’t he say he’d send us back to where we came from?”

“Not specifically, no. He said, ‘I’ll send you to Latka.’ He let us *think* he meant the Latka City we came from, then sent us to a completely different Latka.” Sometimes totally unrelated cities ended up with the same name. Apparently this was one of those cases. “So he got out of fighting us, but he sure managed to set us back... Darn it.”

I’d played a little board game as a child, in which it was possible to land on a space just before the finish line that sent you all the way back to the start... but I’d never thought that would happen to me in real life. That said, it wasn’t like I was in any particular hurry to get home. I was just headed that way as part of my leisurely journey.

I addressed the old man again. “To tell the truth, we’re pretty lost... Could I ask if there’s a sorcerers’ council in this city?”

The old man scowled at us in confusion for a moment. “Never heard of one.”

“Then is there a large city nearby that *does* have a sorcerers’ council?” I tried asking instead.

“I’m sorry...” The wrinkle in the man’s brow deepened, and he spoke apologetically. “But I don’t know a thing about sorcerers’ councils.”

“Oh, I see.” I finally realized the nature of the misunderstanding.

As the name suggests, a sorcerers' council was a group of sorcerers designed to assist others of the same profession. Most large cities had a branch, and they handled magic items and long-range communications with other branches. However, while a sorcerer like me got a lot of use out of such councils, they were beyond the ken of most folks who didn't practice magic. This old gent likely couldn't have cared less which cities did and didn't have councils, so I was gonna have to get my info elsewhere.

"Is there an inn in this town, then?" I asked instead.

"An inn, you say?" The old man finally smiled and gave us detailed instructions on how to get there.

Egh... I just managed to refrain from groaning out loud.

An eatery-slash-drinkery on the ground floor, open late, with guest rooms for rent upstairs—that was more or less what I'd come to expect from an inn. But the so-called inn Gourry and I arrived at was a perfectly average civilian house, no different in atmosphere or size than the other residences in the area. At first I thought we'd come to the wrong place, but near the entrance was a small sign that read "Inn" in what looked like the handwriting of a child who'd only just learned the word.

So we were *probably* in the right place. But it still looked like an ordinary house that just happened to have an open room to rent to travelers.

"What's wrong, Lina?" Gourry asked from behind me as I stared out into space. "Why are we standing around here? Don't we have to get to the inn?"

"Um, Gourry..."

"What?"

I looked back over my shoulder and pointed tremblingly at the house. "I think this *is* the inn."

Gourry broke out in a big, broad smile. "You're joking."

"I'm serious."

Gourry's smile froze. "Huh? So we're staying here tonight?"

“No way. The whole reason I wanted to find an inn was to rustle up info in a place with plenty of people.” It was only a little after noon, so if there was a large city nearby, we could easily walk there. We didn’t actually have to spend the night in Latka. And as for info... “Even if we go in here...”

“It’ll be dead as a doornail,” Gourry said, not at all shy about stating the rude truth. Granted, I was thinking the exact same thing.

So, with little other choice, we walked away from the supposed inn and down a nearby street lined with stalls and shops. There we found a fruit-seller. Her stall wasn’t particularly large, but it featured a lineup of produce I’d never seen before. I plucked out a couple of apples from among them.

“Two of these please, ma’am!” I called to the old lady running the stall.

“Sure thing. Four corsenas, if’n you please,” she said. She had a slight accent too, just like the old man had before.

I was pretty familiar with the local currency of most kingdoms, but I’d never heard of corsenas. “Do you accept copper coins from other kingdoms?” I asked.

“You a traveler, eh? ’Fraid not...”

“Then could I pay in silver and get change?”

“That’ll do.”

And so we completed the transaction. It was common enough for different countries to call their domestic coins by different names, and the coppers of some nations weren’t accepted beyond their own borders. But gold and silver coins, where the material itself had value, were pretty universal. I handed her the silver and studied the coppers she gave me in change. They were unfamiliar coinage with some kind of shell inscribed on one face.

“By the way, ma’am, I have a question. I assume we’re currently in the Alliance of Coastal Nations. Could you tell me roughly about where?”

“Eh?” she asked back blankly. I repeated my question, and she furrowed her brow in studied silence. “Sorry, what? What’s an allyants of coatsall nayshuns?” she asked at last.

“Uh?” Now it was my turn to stare blankly.

Someone with no interest in politics might not know the names of faraway locations. Not knowing the name of the alliance she lives in, though? That definitely isn't normal.

“Erm, it's a group of countries near the ocean... This isn't one of them?” I asked.

“Well, I don't know much about our kingdom, but I never heard of us being part of some larger group.”

Huh? A sudden shiver ran up my spine, and a thought ran through my mind. Hoping to repudiate it, I said, “Okay, then have you heard of any of these countries? Ralteague, Zephilia, Saillune, Lyzeille...”

The woman shook her head apologetically.

“Th-Then... could you tell me the names of all the countries you *do* know?”

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously at me, but replied, “All right, but I don't know many. Let's see...”

The names she proceeded to recite... Never heard of it, never heard of it, never heard of it. The longer she went on, the more I could feel the blood drain from my face.

“But this domain is known as Luzilte—” She stopped short. “Say, are you well? You've gone pale as death!”

“Ah... I'm fine,” I croaked.

“You sure you're okay, Lina? What's wrong?” Gourry looked down at me in concern.

“I just realized what's going on,” I replied, hoarsely.

“What's going on?”

The unfamiliar town. The strange fruits. The distinctive accents. That was all within expectations. But I didn't know any of the countries she named, nor did she know any of the countries I named. Which suggested something I didn't even want to consider...

I laid out the frankly absurd situation for Gourry. “We're in the world far

beyond the Desert of Destruction... outside the demons' barrier."

Legend has it that, long ago, the gods and demons fought for control of our world. On one side was Flare Dragon Ceifeed. On the other, Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu. Ceifeed wanted to protect the world, while Shabranigdu wanted to destroy it. They battled, and in time, their duel ended in a draw. The exhausted Ceifeed divided his power into four entities, creating the four Dragon Lords as pillars representing fire, earth, water, and air. The exhausted Shabranigdu was split into seven fragments and reincarnated inside human beings, his consciousness sealed, yet waiting for a chance to be reborn.

Then, nigh a thousand years ago, the demons rose to challenge Aqualord, protector of the Kataart Mountains in the north. Aqualord was thus pitted against one reborn shard of the Dark Lord. Four of his demonic lieutenants—Hellmaster, Dynast, Greater Beast, and Deep Sea—formed a barrier anchored in the lands surrounding the Kataarts in order to diminish Aqualord's power and prevent intervention from the other Dragon Lords. This plan spelled the demise of Aqualord, but the revived Dark Lord was ultimately sealed away in ice. And so the Kataart Mountains were transformed from a sacred place into a demonic one.

This conflict came to be known as the Incarnation War. Since that time, the lands in which we lived—including my homeland of Zephilia, the Alliance of Coastal Nations, Saillune, et cetera—had been cut off by Hellmaster's barrier in the Desert of Destruction on the edge of the Elemekia Empire. It made all the lands beyond inaccessible, and the same was true in other directions. Our sea routes (if there'd ever been any) were likewise cut off by the demons' barrier. We were entirely sealed off from the "outer lands."

Or maybe I should say we *had been* sealed off. Because right now, those outer lands were the only place I could imagine us being.

"For real?" Gourry asked. We'd taken a seat on some wooden crates next to the fruit-seller's stall to enjoy our apples by the roadside.

"For real," I whispered listlessly as I finished mine.

“Don’t be down, Lina. You’re acting like that Norst guy,” Gourry replied from beside me, fresh off his own apple.

“I don’t really care about that...”

“But panicking won’t get you anywhere, will it?”

I let out a deep sigh. “You just don’t get it, Gourry.”

“Get what?”

“We’re currently outside of the demons’ barrier... beyond the Desert of Destruction, I think.”

“Yeah, you mentioned that,” he said with a shrug.

“I don’t know how far away we are, or even what city we’re even in!”

“Sure.”

“I have no idea how to get us back where we came from!”

“Figures.”

He doesn’t get it. He doesn’t get it at all...

“You listen here!” I declared. “Mouth-watering milsafish and flavorful autumn nigi-mushrooms! Otarl sea bream that tastes of the divine when sautéed, and mineva duckling packed with savory deliciousness! We’ll never get to eat any of those again!”

“For real?” Gourry said, slumping down to the ground limply.

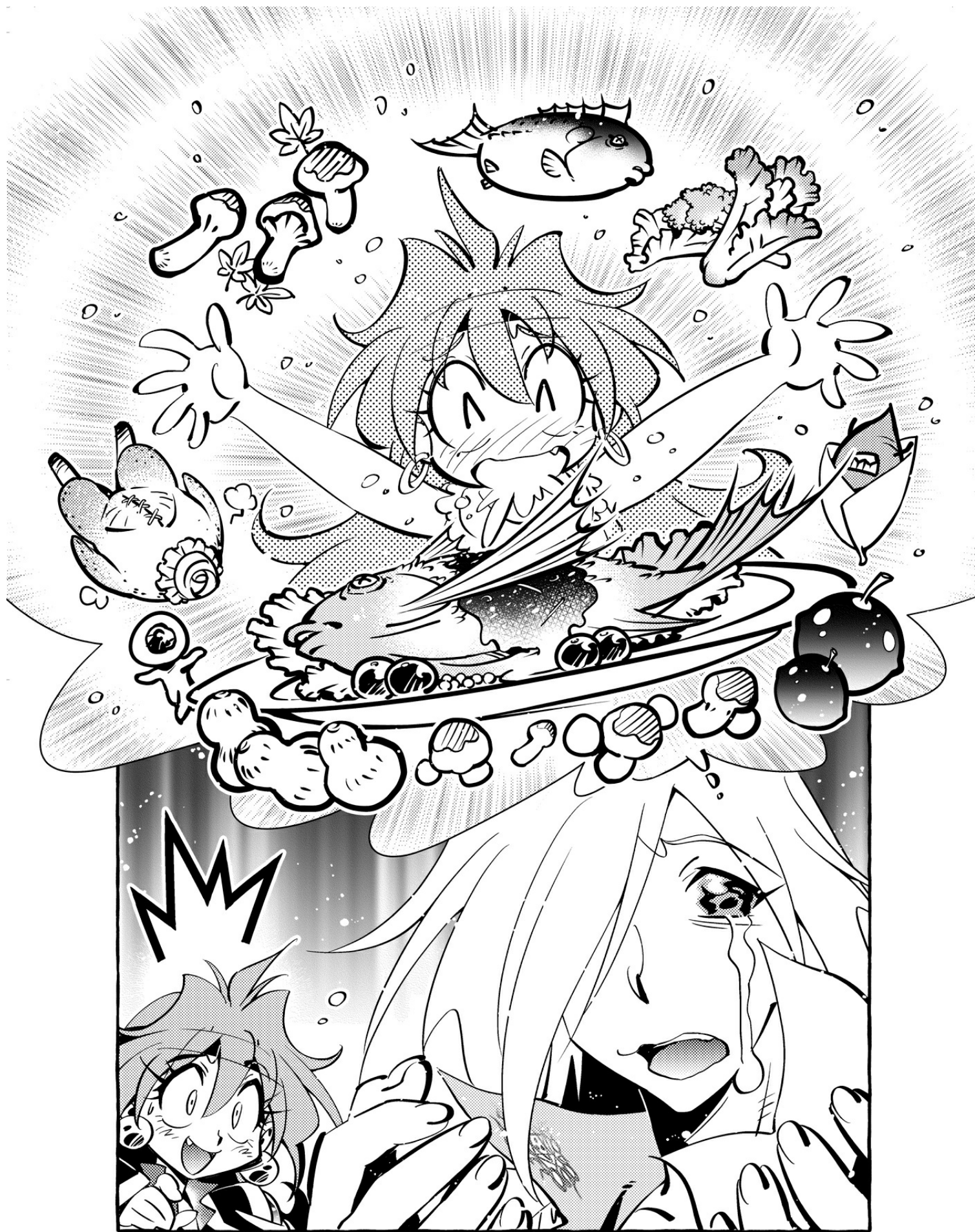
“For real.”

Tears began to flow from his eyes.

You’re crying, dude?!

“Lina, I... I don’t know what to do...”

Somehow, seeing Gourry even more depressed than I was about our future food prospects inspired a perverse streak of optimism in me. “Hey, c’mon, man... I know how you feel. But it’s too soon to give in to despair.”



Slowly, I stood up. “I was pretty shaken, I’ll admit... but not all hope is lost.”

Gourry just gazed up at me blankly.

I nodded firmly to reassure him—moreover, to reassure myself. “It’s true! Let’s try looking at this differently. After all, we might get to try all kinds of tasty foods we can only find here!”

“Oh!” The light returned to Gourry’s eyes.

“We’ll travel the land sampling new forms of deliciousness! Besides, we can still find a way home! We’ll walk as long as we have ground at our feet, and if we run out of ground, we’ll just find a boat!”

“Great points, all!” Gourry stood up with renewed vigor. He stared straight into my eyes. “And... I’m not alone! Because I have you, Lina!”

“...”

Wait... what the hell is he saying?! I felt my face go hot.

After a moment, he continued, “As long as you’re here, I don’t have to worry about money! Because you’re so reliable about stuff like that! Wait, what’s wrong? Why are you looking at me that way?”

“Oh, uh... right.” *That’s what he meant?!* I let out a quiet sigh. “Anyhoo! Nothing to it but to do it! Let’s ask around and set a course based on what we learn!”

“Yeah! You handle the asking and the planning!” Gourry proclaimed, happily leaving the hard work to me.

Still, right now, we were all about momentum! Which was why I opted not to yell at him!

And so, after being flung into the outer lands by a tricky jerk, Gourry and I resumed our homeward journey.

Whether in the inner or outer lands, people were still people. They practiced all the same professions. Meaning...

“All right, you lot! Strip down! Leave yer clothes where you’re standin’ and

we'll spare yer lives! Ya got it?"

Yup, bandits who attacked travelers, spitting the same old cliché lines and flashing their swords—there were dudes like that here too. Go figure.

Gourry and I had heard that if we left Latka and followed the main road, we'd make it to the rather large city of Maricida by sunset. We'd set out right away, but not long after beginning our walk down the more-or-less deserted road, we were met by a group of ten or so men.

Mr. Mohawk, naked from the waist up with a tattoo on his cheek, flashed his shortsword and sneered. "Well? What'll it be?"

Hoo boy. What'll it be, huh? You guessed it...

"Fireball."

Kra-kooooom! The ball of light I unleashed landed smack in the middle of the bandit gang, exploded, and sent them all flying. (I'd chanted the spell while Mr. Mohawk was running down the same old trite script, see.)

There we go... After making sure all the guys in front of us were down for the count, I turned right around. Not far off was another band of five or six bandits.

Ah, I knew it. Stop your prey in their tracks and drone on to keep their attention while a detachment moves in to pincer them from behind. Theoretically, an effective ambush strategy. But after watching me blow away their main force with a single spell, the flying column wasn't doing much but standing there in shock. I was about to start another chant, but before I could...

"W-W-Wait a minute!" A member of the detachment, dressed in a bear skin, spoke up hastily. "We've seen how powerful you are! We'll leave you alone! So, please..."

"So, please, let us continue our lawless rampage elsewhere'? Is that it?" I pressed him.

Seeming to detect the edge in my tone, he went pale. "I-It's not like that! It's not like we wanted to be bandits! I had lousy parents who beat me as a kid—"

"Aha. Now that you mention it, yeah, I'm sure nobody *wants* to become a bandit."

“R-Right?!”

“And I am sympathetic to your past.”

“So then...”

“But I don’t feel sorry for anyone who, rather than refusing to be like the people who hurt them, decides to become an abuser instead.”

“Huh?”

I smiled brightly at him, and...

The roar of a second Fireball echoed through the forest.

“Well? What now, Lina?” Gourry asked me over breakfast the next day.

Yet again, however, we’d been unable to find a proper inn. We’d made it to Maricida, and while the place was indeed rather large, it was pretty sleepy. It felt less like a planned city and more like two or three villages pasted together.

After arriving the afternoon prior, we’d done a brief once-around looking for lodging, but unlike cities in the inner lands, there were very few houses here with a second floor, and only a handful of those had any size at all. There were no large shops, just a few stores here and there like what we’d seen in Latka.

But what bothered me the most was that, unlike back home, there just wasn’t much in the way of facilities catering to travelers. The “inn” we’d found in Maricida wasn’t quite as small as the one in Latka—by which I mean that it had a handful of spare rooms instead of just the one. There were no extra amenities, so we’d had to find dinner and breakfast elsewhere.

Having an eatery on the first floor of an inn allowed travelers to go straight to their rooms after dinner, rest up, and grab breakfast the minute they woke up in the morning. I’d grown so accustomed to that setup that the lack of it felt especially frustrating. Fortunately, there were quite a few stalls outside the inn that were open late into the night and early in the morning, so at least we hadn’t starved.

Gourry and I had stopped by one such stall for breakfast, and were currently eating some kind of flat, flour-based noodles topped with a bland, sticky

vegetable and finely marbled meat. It didn't look much like what we were used to, but they called it saury. It had a homey sort of taste to it, but there wasn't much variation to the menu (it being a stall and all) and the portions were on the small side.

Perched atop the wooden crates left out to serve as seating, Gourry and I sated our growling stomachs with two bowls apiece. Then, at last, it was time to decide our next move.

"Hmm, we have options," I said, thinking for a moment. "We could get a third bowl, but I think I'd like to hit up a few other stalls first. Fried chicken is always good, but it's not like I haven't had it before... so let's go for foods that look out of the ordinary. Obviously, there's a chance we'll find something we don't like, but we'll never know unless we try it."

Okay, don't laugh about the fact that we were still talking food! Sleeping and eating are the most important elements of survival! When visiting a new place, it's important to learn about the local cuisine!

The food here was different from back home in all kinds of ways, see, and there were tons of ingredients I'd never seen before. So when Gourry and I inevitably ended up roughing it out on the road, we could easily end up eating poison. If we could more or less stick to what we'd seen for sale at stalls and such, though, I knew we'd be okay. So in order to be able to make the right calls, I had to feel out the local food scene as much as possible.

"But once we're done with that—" I began before stopping abruptly.

There was a tension in the air. When I realized that and looked in the most likely direction, I saw an armed group walking along the roadside a little ways off.

The town guard, perhaps?

It was a roughly twenty-man force that seemed like a real motley crew. Only five of them looked like real soldiers with proper helmets, armor, and spears. As for the rest, they seemed to just be carrying whatever weapons and armor they could scrounge up. It was clear from the way they comported themselves that they didn't have any bona fide combat training. Still, their faces were grim and battle-ready.

This is...

“Let’s go, Gourry. We’ll hit up the stalls later.” We’d paid in advance when we put in our order, so Gourry stood up to join me and we quickly began moving in the direction of the armed group.

“This isn’t like you, Lina,” he said. “You don’t usually like sticking your nose into other people’s business.”

“To be clear, I still don’t like it—but it’s best to earn the trust of the locals, right?” My exact involvement would depend on the nature of the conflict, of course. But this was a golden opportunity to break the ice. “Excuse me!” I called as I approached the group.

The men stopped and looked back at us. “What is it?” responded the guy at the lead. He had a red beard and looked around thirty years old.

“We’re a traveling sorcerer and mercenary.” I dropped my voice to a whisper. “Has... something happened?”

The lead soldier looked us over with an appraising eye. “A sorcerer... A magician, you mean?” His grim expression eased slightly.

Apparently the term “sorcerer” wasn’t all that common around here. “More or less,” I replied nevertheless.

“Perfect! Please help us! We’d be so grateful!”

“Give us the deets first.”

“I’ll explain on the way. We must make haste,” the soldier said, already on the move again.

“Sure thing,” I responded and began to follow him.

“I’m Bronco, captain of the guard in this city. Those behind me are my men.”

They look like mostly newbies, I thought, but kept it to myself. “I’m Lina. Lina Inverse. And my companion here is Gourry. We’re kind of on a wayward journey, and you guys look like you’re in some trouble, so we figured we’d see what was up. So, what’s up?”

My question provoked a grave silence from Bronco. “I’m not sure how to put

it... It's complicated. Just come with me. It's possible you'll know more about it than I do."

"Is it serious?"

"I hope I'm wrong, but..." Bronco said, trying to hide his expression but looking rather pale, "it could be the end of Maricida City."

The moment we saw it, we all came to a halt.

"What in the world is that?" someone whispered numbly, his voice trembling with fear. The sight before him must have been just that shocking to him.

"I don't know." Bronco's response was similarly tremulous. "But... there's some kind of monster in the area. We can say that much for sure."

"Say, my grandfather told me a story once..." Another soldier spoke up. "He said that back when he was kid, long before Maricida got so huge, a wicked greater demon appeared and laid into the town. Hundreds of soldiers were sent from the capital to destroy it, and they managed to slay the demon, but half of them perished in the battle and Maricida was nearly destroyed. Do you think... maybe the demon has come back?"

"Don't be absurd!" Bronco barked. "I've heard that old story before! But... there's no way!"

"Then tell us what, Captain Bronco! What else could have done this?!"

While I listened to their exchange... I was filled with regret.

The soldiers continued. "What else could so effortlessly destroy the bandits who've been tormenting us?! And... to scorch the very ground itself? What kind of monster could have done this?!"

I'm really sorry. It was totally me.

The spooked Bronco—sorry, Captain Bronco—and his men had taken me and Gourry down the road between Latka and Maricida where I'd chucked two Fireballs at the poor bandits from yesterday. Needless to say, there were still two large, burnt craters in the ground.

The whole group was quickly abuzz with fearful speculation about the

“legendary demon” reviving. Judging by their reactions, I presumed the Fireball spell wasn’t common in these parts. Back in the inner lands, it wasn’t so universal that all sorcerers knew how to cast it, but its name was widely known. It wasn’t unusual to go up against a foe who could use it. Even rank-and-file soldiers and mercs at least knew it was a spell that involved shooting a ball of light that exploded on impact.

“We... We’re finished...” The soldiers slumped to their knees, weeping.

“Lina.” While that was going on, Gourry placed a firm hand on my shoulder. “I think you’d better say it sooner rather than later.”

“You’re right...” I didn’t have a choice. I timidly raised a hand and said, “Listen, I—”

Captain Bronco gasped. “Wait a minute! I knew seeing something like this might make you want to run away! I won’t ask you to fight with us. But please, if you know anything, share it with us!”

“Um, this is kinda hard to say, but...”

“I don’t care! We’re ready for any truth you might reveal to us!”

“Actually... I did this. Me.”

Captain Bronco froze up for a few moments, then muttered, “What?” He was glaring at me. Super hard.

I found myself looking away as I continued, “Er, well, see, um... Yesterday, me and Gourry were out here... and bandits attacked... and I used an attack spell that... y’know... went all ‘splodey.”

“Ahh...” As if he’d come to some realization, Captain Bronco’s gaze suddenly softened. “You’re trying to put me at ease. If only everyone could believe such a kind lie... But I have a duty to protect Maricida. Even... Even if we’re dealing with a monster. Even if it’s an unwinnable battle.” He cast a forlorn gaze out over the horizon.

So he’s the kind of guy who needs to see to believe, huh? He’d brought this on himself. I recited the incantation and took aim at a spot a safe distance from the group. “Fireball.”

The whole task force groveled before me.

I'm sorry... Really sorry...

The bar was so loud it probably should've gotten complaints from the neighbors. It was so raucous that there was nary a moment without an awkward cackle from some drunkard or other.

After we'd cleared up the whole demonic revival misunderstanding and I made it clear to the town guard that I was responsible for the craters, the men instantly moved to celebrating the bandits' demise. We'd thus returned to Maricida and begun a drinking-slash-eating party. It wasn't evening yet—in fact, it wasn't even lunchtime. But they'd apparently been so run ragged by the bandits that booze was the first order of business.

Captain Bronco called in the rest of his soldiers (security brigade—whatever they were) who were on watch, bringing the total headcount to forty or fifty. There were too many of us to fit inside one building, so half of the guys were drinking out front. I really was worried we were disturbing the peace.

“Well, well! Mistress Lina! Your magics are truly incredible!” Captain Bronco bellowed.

With his helmet off, I could see he had disheveled red hair to match his beard. Years in the business had given him a forbidding gaze, and he was a big, muscular man. In other words, he kinda looked like a ruffian. If I ran into him on the road at night without knowing him, I'd definitely blast him on the spot with an attack spell and whisper to myself, *“Whew, close call.”*

“‘Fireball,’ you called it?” he continued. “To think a single spell could do so much! Not even the magicians of the capital are capable of that!”

Gourry gnawed on a chicken leg as he listened to Bronco gush. “Is Lina's magic really that special?”

“You bet it is!” the captain said. “Such powerful magic could— Ah, Master Gourry, I'm sure you've gotten used to Mistress Lina's magic after spending so much time with her, but I've never seen such a powerful spell! Normally folks

never get to see magic at all unless they know a court magician! I myself only saw it once when I was a young lad, and it was nothing so incredible! They simply turned the horizontal stripes on a handkerchief to vertical ones.”

You call that “magic”?! Let me tell you—I had opinions about that. But at any rate, real magic was apparently quite rare out here in the outer lands. Even Captain Bronco, who made his living on the battlefield, knew next to nothing about it, which told me he’d never fought anyone who could use it.

“Say, you mentioned court sorcere—er, court magicians...” While I waffled over the wording, I asked Captain Bronco, “So if we go to the capital, might we find a sorcerers’ coun—rather, some kind of magical association or school?”

“A magical association or school, eh?” A furrow appeared in Captain Bronco’s brow. “I’ve heard of no such thing... but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist. There are rumors that the high priests of Ceifeed can call upon divine miracles, but that’s not exactly an organization or school.”

He was right about that. Maricida had a temple to Ceifeed, which I’d visited the day before, but the priests and shrine maidens there couldn’t use any spells. Where I came from, most priests learned a basic Recovery spell as an easy way to grant blessings. I’d just assumed the churches here rolled differently, but it turned out there was more to it than that.

“Hmm... Could you tell us the way to the capital, then, Captain Bronco?” I asked.

“Absolutely! I’ll give you a simple map to Palbathos. Oh, and speaking of, I have an acquaintance in the guard there. I’ll write you a letter of introduction!”

That sounded great, and I was certainly grateful... but Gourry and I still didn’t have any leads on getting home.

What would I learn in this capital of theirs? Fighting back the anxieties in my chest, I decided to take this night to make small talk with Captain Bronco’s crew and enjoy all kinds of unknown foods.

2: Being a Peerless Spellcaster Isn't All Fun and Games

The smell of the wind, the color of the greenery... Things I assumed would be the same anywhere you went revealed differences when I really stopped to take them in. Even the landscape, which looked like a generic verdant mélange from a distance, turned out to be full of unfamiliar trees and other plants upon close inspection. By the same token, I hadn't yet seen any of the herbs commonly used for making magic items in the inner lands where I was from. I would have liked to do some research on what I was finding instead, but we had bigger fish to fry at the moment.

It was now the following day, and Gourry and I had left the city of Maricida en route to the capital, Palbathos. As we stopped at a fork in the road, I pulled out the documents Captain Bronco had prepared for us. He'd given me a map he'd drawn (that was more like a diagram of roads scrawled on a scrap of parchment) as well as the aforementioned letter of introduction—plus a courtesy fee for vanquishing the bandits.

"I gotta say..." Gourry said, peering at the map from the side. "That guy was nice, but he's got pretty bad handwriting."

Notes were written on the map at various points, but they were damned hard to parse. That said...

"It's not bad handwriting. It's a different alphabet."

"A different alphabet?!" Gourry's voice cracked.

"Yup. After all, the inner and outer lands have had zero cultural exchange for a thousand years. Of course they've diverged in that time. I'd chalked the slight quirks in the locals' speech up to a regional dialect or something, but we're honestly lucky their language is even comprehensible to us. If things had diverged too much, we wouldn't be able to communicate at all. Point is, I suspect this is hard to make out because of the difference in written language—

not because Captain Bronco's handwriting is bad."

I'd originally taken the sign at the inn back in Latka for badly written too, but apparently I was wrong about that. The writing was just divergent from the script I knew. Perhaps it was even our language in the inner lands that had shifted over the past millennium—not theirs.

"I guess that means you can't read it, huh?" Gourry mused.

"I can, actually," I informed him.

"The alphabet's different but you can read it? How?"

"The script is different from what we use, sure, but it's not *that* different. Which makes sense, given how little the spoken language has changed. Basically, the letters aren't the same, but they have similar forms. And since this is a map, you can kinda already tell what words are supposed to mean north, south, east, west, left, right, mountain, river, and other geography-related stuff. So, from that, we can infer what the writing says, right?"

"Oh! Incredible!"

"That's not to say I can make out all of this, though. Here, for instance..." I pointed to a particular place on the map. "It says to go left at this fork and we'll end up at what looks like a 'bas stop.' I dunno what a 'bas' is, though. Maybe some kind of boat or shared carriage."

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, I guess."

"Guess so." I nodded, stuck the map back into my pocket, and dutifully followed the leftward path.

"Say, Lina, you think things will work out once we get to this capital place?"

"Dunno. But they sure *won't* if we *don't* go." I kept walking as we chatted. To our left were trees. To the right, grassland. There was nobody else on the road. Maybe because it wasn't a major road, or maybe because there just weren't many travelers and peddlers in the outer lands, I noticed that it was fairly overgrown with weeds. "Ideally we'll find out exactly where we are and what direction home's in, but money is also an issue."

"We don't have enough?"

“We have no idea how much it’ll take to get back, and while I have gold coins that seem easily convertible into local currency, I’m not sure I’ve got us totally covered. Most of my assets are in the form of magic items... but there’s no sorcerers’ council here in the outer lands. If I try to sell them off at a local shop that doesn’t know what they are, they’re liable to treat them like junk. So another reason I want to go to the capital is to find somewhere that’ll give me decent—or at least not awful—prices. Of course, I’d also like to pin down some real directions sooner rather than later too.”

In simple terms, the Desert of Destruction that divided the inner and outer lands was to the south of Elemekia. So, also in simple terms, going north would get us home. Down in the nitty-gritty, however, there were bound to be geographical features we needed to maneuver around that would make our journey somewhat less than a straight shot. I would’ve loved to get my hands on a proper world map, but that was as good as out of the question. Even if such a thing existed, it’d be treated like a state secret. No way was a layman like me getting their mitts on it.

Now, I bet you’re wondering, “Why would a map be a state secret?” Well, lots of reasons. War, for one. Let’s say a neighboring kingdom wanted to invade. Which do you think would make it easier for them: access to a map detailing the local roads, towns, mountains, and rivers, or the total lack thereof? Keeping your geography hush-hush makes it harder for your enemy to advance, and easier for you to set terrain-based traps and ambushes. You could take a huge chunk out of their forces without fighting a single battle.

In other words, while countries generally *did* desire accurate maps of their own lands, they also had to be careful not to let them fall into enemy hands. Ergo, such things weren’t available to ordinary citizens or travelers. That was the case back home, and I was certain it was true here. Granted, how the major roads joined together and such was something that your average peddlers and travelers *would* know. So I figured hitting up the capital would let us chat up the right folks.

As I pondered all this while walking...

“Lina,” Gourry called to me suddenly. For a moment, I assumed there were more bandits—but I saw no sign of any. Gourry didn’t stop walking either.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Are you all right?”

The question felt totally out of the blue. “What do you mean?” I asked.

Gourry stared at me. “Seriously, are you all right?” he repeated.

“Dude, I seriously don’t know what you’re getting at. Why are you asking if I’m...” I started, stopping myself before I could finish. I let out a deep sigh and ran my fingers through my hair. “I guess I can’t hide it from you, Gourry,” I whispered, gazing up at the sky, the white clouds, and the birds that seemed so familiar at a distance. “Ever since we were sent here to the outer lands, I’ve felt... not quite depressed, but more sedate than usual. And it’s building up on me, little by little by little.”

“Homesick?” he asked simply.

I waved my hand dismissively. “No. I don’t think it’s that, anyway. After all, I was traveling solo before I met you. I was even more adrift then, you know? But now that we can’t get back—” I stopped, feeling a catch in my throat. *This is...* I mussed my hair. “Well, maybe you’re right. Maybe I *am* homesick, as unlike me as that is.”

Saying the words “can’t get back” had clearly affected me.

“I think it’s the difference between ‘won’t go home’ and ‘can’t go home,’” I tried to explain.

“What do you mean?”

“Before... I could always backtrack if I ever felt like it. Staying away was a choice. But now, I don’t know if going back’s even still an option. And even if it is, who knows how long it’ll take? That’s been getting to me. What about you, Gourry? How are you holding up?” I recalled he’d once mentioned that home for him was somewhere in the Elemekia Empire.

He smiled easily at me in response. “I’m feeling pretty good myself.”

“Really?”

“I forgot about most things, after all.”

“Don’t forget home, dude!”

“Hey, I’m just kidding. Just kidding.”

“It didn’t sound like it to me!”

Maybe it was because I was yelling at Gourry, or maybe it was because I’d finally put my finger on the source of my melancholy...



But I suddenly felt a lot more at ease. I looked up at the sky and stretched. “Well, now that I think about it, we’ve been through our share of impossible fights. So... I can’t say for sure that this’ll all work out, but relatively speaking, finding a way home should be a breeze.”

“I feel the same way.” Gourry smiled kindly at me.

I hadn’t totally sorted out my feelings. It was possible I’d let them get the better of me soon enough. But as long as I wasn’t alone, I’d be able to figure something out. That mysterious certainty swept away all the pain in my heart.

Listening to the songs of unknown birds, I followed our map until the trees to the left of the road began to thin out. Before long, I could see shining rays of sun through the gaps between them. The scent of water began to pervade the verdant smells too. And by the time the trees had disappeared completely, Gourry and I came to a stop.

The road before us was cut off by... blue.

“A lake?” Gourry asked.

“Or a river,” I responded.

There were barely any waves, and the water wasn’t very clear, but because of that, it reflected the surrounding scenery on its surface. I could just barely see the opposite shore. Whether it was a lake or a river, it was remarkably large.

“Which means...” I scanned the waterline until my eyes fell on a small building down the way.

Gourry gazed in the same direction and said, “That must be the whatsit stop.”

“Looks like.” We both started walking again. “I guess it’s a ferry after all.”

Looking closely at the seemingly calm surface of the water, there were signs of ripples along the banks. Probably a large river, then.

The closer we got, the better I could make out the ferry landing. The building was a sturdy little cabin, and there was a boat at the pier large enough to carry a dozen or more people easily. It didn’t have a roof, and the ‘seats’ were just a series of planks, but there were already several passengers aboard. A boatman stood at the helm, and... Wait, was it about to leave?!

“Book it, Gourry!”

“Hey! Hey, wait for us!” Gourry called as we took off at a run.

Thankfully, the boatman seemed to hear us. He waved and waited for us to catch up.

“Is this... the ferry... to Palbathos?” I asked when we arrived, heaving for breath.

The elderly boatman smiled widely. “Sure is! Payment in advance, please!”

“You got it!”

Catching my breath, I paid the man and boarded the boat from the pier. It wasn't as unstable as I'd thought it might be, probably thanks to its size. The passengers already on board included a guy who looked like a peddler with a large pack on his back, an ordinary traveler, and various other folks along with a few caged chickens. The boatman must've ferried cargo too.

He waited until Gourry and I were seated, then bellowed, “The bas boat is settin' sail!”

That was the last call before he reached out with a long pole with feathers at the end and lightly tapped the still water in front of the boat. Then, slowly but surely, solid black figures rippled to the surface. They were larger than humans, maybe even as long as an ogre was tall. It was a pair of...

“Fish?!” I found myself jumping up and shouting.

“Hey, stay in your seat. It's not safe to stand up,” the boatman scolded me. “You seem a bit surprised... Have you never seen bas before?”

“Wait, so the ‘bas’ isn't the boat. It's...”

“A kind of fish, yes. Come on, we're setting out. I'll explain it as we go.” The boatman tapped the water with the feathered pole again, and the two figures slowly began to move. As they did, a rope surfaced in the water, pulled taut, and steadily dragged the boat along behind it.

“They're known as giant bas, and though they're fish, they're very smart,” the boatman pronounced proudly. He indicated the chicken cages with his eyes. “As thanks for pulling the boat, I feed them. And as long as I uphold my end of the

deal, they're tame. They might even understand human language."

"Wait, those chickens are fish food?!"

"Oh, yes. They swallow 'em up in one gulp," he said even more proudly.

Maybe this goes without saying, but there were *not* fish like this in the inner lands I came from. Certainly none capable of pulling a boat the way a horse would a carriage. Although, when I stopped to think about it, we *did* have fish with arms and legs, considerable intelligence, and the capacity for speech. I didn't know if the same fishfolk lived here in the outer lands, but I supposed I shouldn't be all that surprised that they had some kind of intelligent fish.

The boat moved slowly at first, then gradually picked up speed until...

"Hang on! Hang on! Hang oooooon!" someone cried. I looked to see a girl running straight for the boat the same way Gourry and I had come. "Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait!"

Her voice grew louder and louder as she barreled toward us with tremendous speed, but the boat had already set sail. That didn't stop her, though. In fact, she ran faster!

"Huuwaaah!" With a strange cry, she took a flying leap from the pier! Of course, there was no way she'd make it. And so, she fell with a splash between the riverside and the ferry...

Or so I would have thought, but it went down differently. Instead, the arc of her jump extended unnaturally midair and she kept heading straight for us until... *Thunk!* She just barely landed on—er, boarded?—the edge of the boat.



The ferry rocked heavily from the impact, and the passengers shouted in shock.

“Excuse me, miss!” The boatman was understandably agitated. “Don’t jump in like that! It’s dangerous, and you’ll startle the fish!”

“Eh heh heh... Sorry,” she apologized lightly, not looking particularly penitent. She seemed a bit younger than me, with curly golden hair flowing down her back and richly brown skin. As for her height and bust size... Ah, damn it. Never mind. Who cares about that?

She was dressed like she was out for a nice stroll around the block. Some would say she was traveling light, while others would have said she was woefully underprepared for a long journey. She was carrying a small sack for her belongings and a wooden stick whose purpose I couldn’t decipher. Overall, I got an “ordinary village girl who’d had a fight with her dad and run away from home” vibe from her.

“Do you have your fare, missy?” the boatman asked.

“Ah, yah, yah.” Turned out she was ready for a journey after all and paid her way when prompted.

“Now, never do that again.”

“Teeheehee... Real sorry. Ah, and I’m sorry to all of you too!” After being scolded by the boatman, she apologized to everyone and took a seat.

The fish-pulled boat sped up as we moved upstream. When I finally had a chance, I moved to sit next to the latecomer. Gourry followed, realizing I was up to something... or not. Who’s to say?

“Hi there!” I called to the girl casually.

She turned her brown eyes toward me. “Oh, hiya. Sorry for the fuss.”

I replied with a warm smile, “I’m Lina. And my companion here is Gourry.”

“Call me Ran!” The girl—Ran—took my outstretched hand and shook it. Her hand was so soft it shocked me a little.

“I was hoping to ask...” I said, still smiling. “You used a wind spell earlier to get

on the boat, didn't you?"

Most people couldn't change the trajectory of their jump halfway through, so magic seemed like the only explanation. But here in the outer lands, where there was no sorcerers' council and folks didn't seem to know much about magic... just who was this girl casually using a wind spell like that? I decided to ask her straight-out and see how she reacted rather than trying to dance around the subject. And in reply, she said...

"Awesome, eh? An elf taught it to me long ago."

She's bragging?! Is it not some giant secret? Wait a sec... "What?! You mean there are elves here too?!"

"Oh, yah, but not too many."

Had I just hit pay dirt? Elves in the inner lands lived longer than humans and were more skilled in spellcasting. Getting in touch with one potentially meant a big lead on how to get home!

But even so... I knew that if I started grilling Ran on the spot, it might put even a bubblehead like her on her guard. So I swallowed my desire to do so and casually replied, "I've known a few elves myself."

"For real? Zowie! How about that! What were they like?"

"Well, one only ordered cabbage at restaurants, and the other was really shy but a total braggart underneath it all."

Ran cocked her head. "So you don't like elves?"

"No! Those are just the elves I know! It's not that I think all elves are like that!"

But our conversation came to an abrupt halt when...

"Hey! Boatman! Behind us!" one of the passengers called out.

Everyone turned around and saw turbulence in the river behind us. This wouldn't be anything special, except... it was moving upstream! Rather, straight toward the boat!

"What's that?!" I yelled.

“No way! It’s the rockeye!” the boatman shouted back.

“The what?” Gourry asked.

The boatman didn’t even spare a glance as he replied, “A big fish that eats bas! Damn it! What’s it doing here?!”

It eats bas, fish even bigger than humans? Just how huge is this darn thing?! If something that size attacked, it could eat the boat—or even us!

The boatman used his pole to spur on the bas fish. Either in response to him or the approaching danger, they sped up and pulled us along swiftly.

Still, when I looked back, I could see the wake steadily gaining on us! If I squinted, I could see a flat figure just below the surface. I couldn’t make it out in full, but judging by its basic silhouette, it could definitely swallow a bas in one go. In other words, this thing was sea-serpent-tier in terms of size. And it was gonna capsize us soon if we didn’t do something!

But... what *could* we do? If we’d been on land, I’d have happily left things up to Gourry, but he’d never be able to hit the thing underwater. A lightning spell from me would harm the giant bas too. And while an indiscriminate area-of-effect spell might chase the thing off even without a direct hit, it would also cause a wave that would capsize us.

Okay, then how about this?! I moved to the back of the boat and began chanting a spell aimed at the lurking black shadow chasing after us.

Dynast with thy frozen soul, slumbering below the earth...

Just then... I felt like my eyes met those of the beast under the surface.

Most attack spells would be physically stymied by water. But what about a spell calling upon the power of a mighty demon? All they consisted of was life, spirit, and magic. A little water wouldn’t make a lick of difference.

That thought passed through my mind briefly... And then I finished my spell! “Dynast Breath!”

This puppy borrowed the power of Dynast Graushera, one of five high-ranking demonic lieutenants. When I recited the words of power, the head of the creature in the water froze and shattered! The scattering fragments caused the

surface to swell, but not violently enough to burst. The rest of the creature's body, not fully covered by the magical ice, continued to writhe a little even as it floated to the surface. It soon stopped moving and drifted off into the distance, carried away by the river's leisurely current.

It was only then that the other passengers spoke up.

"Wow!"

"Was that for real?"

"How did you do that?"

"You took out that big thing in one hit?!"

Honestly, all the oohing and aahing had me a little bashful.

"That's amazing! Was that magic?!" Even the boatman joined in.

"Well, yeah..." I responded impudently.

"Wait, are you a court magician?!"

"Not exactly, no..."

"Either way, you saved us! The rockeyes aren't usually so aggressive, but that bastard acts like he owns this river. They say that if you encounter him, you should abandon ship and consider yourself lucky if you survive. I've known quite a few men who've lost their boats and their fish, so... thank you. Thank you so much," he said, then turned away.

So that was the story, huh? I'd only seen the creature with its head blown off, so I had no idea what kind of beast it really was.

The next thing I knew, Ran was right beside me, looking at me with sparkling eyes. "Nissy Lina, you're amazing!"

"Nissy?!"

"Oh, sorry! That's what we say back home!"

"You do?" I just thought she was trying to be cute!

"Yeah. Here they'd say... Lady Lina!"

"That's a bit much!"

“Should I call you ‘Lady’ instead?” Ran asked, cocking her head.

Nissy and Lady... I wasn’t exactly fond of either. “Just call me Lina.”

“Oh, but I couldn’t do that! Nissy Lina it is, then!”

“Ah, fine. Whatever.”

I hated the idea of being called “Lady Lina,” so I decided to just chalk this up as the lesser of two evils.

When I stopped to think about it, though, the nature of language was to change over time, and given what we’d learned, it was no surprise there were places where odd-sounding words had sprouted up. Much as it annoyed me...

Ran responded, scratching her back with one hand, “Oh, it’s nice we can understand each other even though I’m not from here, but sometimes the little things are real different. Like the laughter! I couldn’t believe it!”

“Even the laughter is different?”

“Yeah. At home, nobody goes ‘hahaha.’ They go ‘eh heh heh’ and such. And the dark lord in children’s stories goes ‘teeheehee.’”

“How is that intimidating?!” *That sounds cute! While words might change, at least apply yourself and give us a ‘keh heh heh’ or a ‘bwahaha’!*

“Well, to us, ‘teeheehee’ sounds real wicked!”

“Does it...?”

I wondered... What if Norst had sent me and Gourry to a region closer to Ran’s homeland? Just the thought of it exhausted me. I was gaining a new appreciation for the importance of dignity in language.

“So,” Ran began, “Nissy Lina and Rostir Gourry...”

“Rostir?!” Gourry and I said in unison.

“Oh, Rostir means—”

“Forget it. Just keep going,” I interrupted dismissively.

“Rostir...” Gourry muttered with a frown and a furrowed brow.

“So, where are you headed, Nissy Lina and Rostir Gourry?”

“Ah... Right. We’re on our way to the capital for now. There’re some things we need to look into.”

“Hmm... Say, can I come?” Ran asked capriciously.

“I don’t mind, but... are you sure? You aren’t heading somewhere yourself?”

“Nope!”

“I see. No destination in mind, eh?” I don’t know why, but even now that I understood her weird colloquialisms, I still couldn’t help but worry about the girl. I felt like adding Ran, who was also a stranger in these parts, wouldn’t be much of a boon to our already clueless party... Still, I wanted to ask her more about the elves she’d mentioned, and I had no particular reason to keep her at arm’s length. “Then let’s head to Palbathos together. We can go our own ways there if we want.”

“Okey lokey!” Ran said, throwing her left hand in the air... And her face went a little pink as she waved her hand side to side. “Sorry, flubbed it. I meant to say ‘okey dokey.’”

“I don’t understand either one,” I said extremely calmly.

As it turned out, having Ran with us wouldn’t be bad at all... In fact, it would be welcome. I just didn’t realize how much until that night.

About half a day after our ride aboard the bas ferry, right around the time the sun was getting low in the sky, we arrived at a small layover town with a harbor. I didn’t much know the lay of the land, so it didn’t completely register, but the boatman told us that traveling from where we’d set off to here would’ve taken two or three days by land. And if that was true, we’d managed quite a shortcut.

Me, Gourry, and Ran all got an inn together and were about to enjoy dinner when... I realized that I couldn’t read the menu on the wall at all.

That made sense, of course; it was still in the same weird alphabet. And yes, while most of the letters were recognizable and I could sound them out if I had to, I couldn’t be completely sure I was reading them right. I tried to translate the item at the top of the menu, presumably the day’s special, but all I could get was “gogiburdruhante,” which didn’t make any sense to me.

Cue Ran's time to shine!

"Hey, Ran," I called as she gazed at the menu herself.

"What is it, Nissy Lina?"

"Can you read the top line for me?"

She looked at it and said, "Sure can!"

...

.....

"Er, I mean... please read it out loud."

"Oh, yah. It says gogiburdruhante."

I was right?! Too bad it still made no sense to me!

"So, what's that...?" I asked.

"Hmm, 'gogi' is a kind of fowl. It's tasty. And ruhante is a dish where you roll out dough real thin, sprinkle oil on top, then put stuff and sauce on it, and roll it all up and fry it. It's crisp on the outside and fluffy on the inside! And the stuff they put on it is gogi, so it's gogi-bird ruhante!"

"I see..." I asked Ran to decipher the rest of the menu for me in the same way.

Whew. Having Ran around turned out to be a huge help after all. Without her, I would've had to ask for dishes at random, and potentially end up with a meal of samey food. Plus, having Ran read things out to me was getting me a little more used to the language and how to decipher it. I mean, all I was amassing right now was food vocabulary, but still.

Anyhoo, I ordered a few things and some drinks and...

"Nissy Lina." Ran tilted her head while we were waiting for our food. "You really can't read?"

Geh... I paused for a moment, considering how to respond. It was true that I couldn't read the language here—which was through no fault of my own, mind you—but I still didn't really wanna cop to it out loud. I wondered if I should admit we didn't know a lot about the area. Ran would figure it out sooner or later anyway...

Then again, if I told her the unvarnished truth—that I was from the other side of the demon barrier erected a thousand years ago, and that after slaying a whole bunch of high-ranked demons, one of their friends had sent me out here out of spite—she'd probably assume I was lying.

“The truth is, Gourry and I... are from a faraway land.” I chose my words carefully. “There was... something of an accident.”

“An accident?! Like a boat sinking?!”

“Hrm, well... Something like that, I guess,” I said, keeping vague. “The point is that we're a long way from home, and the writing here is different. So having you read for me is a huge help.”

“No probsies!” she said, puffing out her chest proudly.

“Thanks. I appreciate it. Basically, we're looking for a way to get home... Do you know a lot about the area, Ran?”

“Hmm...” At this, she hummed lightly. “I left my own home to go on a-wandering, so nah!”

“Oh? What's your homeland like?”

“Green and bountiful!”

“Yeah? Sounds nice.”

“The middle of nowhere!”

“Yeah? Sounds rough.” Then again, she'd mentioned an elf had taught her that nifty little jump-enhancing spell, and elves tended to live in areas of untouched nature. “Did that elf who taught you that spell live there too?”

“Used to! But about ten years ago, they just went away.”

“Oh, really?” That put a damper on my plan to have Ran put me in touch with them. We kept chatting for a bit until...

“Here you go!” The waitress brought the various items of my order, and the lively—even raucous—night began.

After three days of travel, Gourry, Ran, and I found ourselves before the large

wall and gate to Palbathos, capital of the Kingdom of Luzilte.

I'd like to give you a brief primer on the place's history, but unfortunately, I knew nothing about how it was founded or anything that had ever happened here. We'd lost touch with the outer lands a thousand years ago, after all, so I was a little out of my depth on the regional history.

On our way here, I'd asked a lot of people what Palbathos was like, but all I'd gotten in response was that it was "a large city" with a "magnificent castle" and other standard capital-ish tidbits. Nobody gave me a rough history of the place or told me the origin of its name. Not that most folks cared about that kinda stuff, but still.

"It's huuuge!" Ran cooed as she looked up at the place.

I'd seen quite a few castle towns back in the inner lands, and this was on par.

At the gate, we went through the entry procedure, which really just meant paying a toll. And next thing, we were walking out the other side and watching the city expand before us.

Probably as a safeguard against invasion, the streets and buildings weren't laid out in straight lines, which made it hard to see very far. Around the distant town center stood a wall a story taller than the one surrounding the town, and over it, we could see castle spires.

"Now then..." I spoke to Ran as we walked around what appeared to be an entertainment district. "Looks like we made it. What's your plan next, Ran? As I mentioned before, we've got some things to look into here." I was hoping she'd stick around and teach me a little more about the local writing, but I wasn't gonna twist her arm.

"Hmm..." Ran made a big show of thinking. "I'm just a-wandering, and you guys are good at finding great restaurants, so it might be fun to stick together a while longer. But I'm not sure I can help you with what you're investigating... Ah, I know. Let's get an inn together, and I'll see the sights, and we'll see what happens after. Howzat?"

"That'd be great," I said.

"Awesome! Oh, Nissy Lina, how're you investigating?"

“Hmm... Good question.”

On the way here, naturally, I’d talked to plenty of people about the various nations and routes in the area. I knew if I caught wind of a country with a huge impassable desert to the north, I’d know exactly what that was, but...

While there were rumors, they were largely conflicting ones, and it was clear there was a lot of bad info out there. Nevertheless, I *did* learn one thing from it all: If I asked about a given set of conditions (like a country with an impassable desert), people could at least tell me if something like that existed nearby. And the fact that that hadn’t happened told me there wasn’t.

I was hoping to get some more reliable information here in the capital, but whether I hit up the church, the court magicians, the library... If I just barged in any of those, they’d turn me away at the door. That left me with one option.

“I got a letter of introduction from the captain of the guard in another town to give to someone in the guard here. I figured I’d start with them.” With that, I pulled out the letter of introduction and gazed at it.

It was a rough parchment scroll sealed with wax, written with Captain Bronco’s name and addressed to what looked like “Captain Morgan, Head of Palbathos’s Fourth Division.”

“I’d say I’m up to speed now.”

His first words told me what was going on—and that the situation wasn’t good.

I’d asked around town and quickly learned where the Fourth Division’s base was. I then went and handed over the letter, saying I wanted to ask a few questions. They made me sit and wait awhile in a bare-bones room in the guards’ station. It felt more like an interrogation room than a parlor, but I was in no position to be choosy.

After some time, at last, a man named Morgan—a handsome middle-aged blond—came and introduced himself. He sat down, and that was the first thing he said. Basically, he knew what I wanted, but whether or not he would grant it was another question—that was the vibe he was giving me.

“Bronco and I go way back. I know him well enough, but...” He glanced down at the letter of introduction in his hands. ““Mistress Lina is a very powerful magician, so please be accommodating to her. And I hope you’ll use this amazing find on my part to consider me for promotion,’ it says.”

Broncoooo! Trying to use the situation to get ahead, huh?! That’s not to say people shouldn’t be ambitious, but give me a break!

Captain Morgan looked me straight in the eye for a moment. “He’s asked me to be accommodating, but what exactly *is* it that you want?”

“Information,” I responded immediately. “Me and Gourry here boarded a boat in a faraway country called Zephilia, got shipwrecked, and wound up here.”

“What? We did?!” The one who shouted in response to my story was Gourry... Wait.

Didn’t I tell you that was going to be our cover ahead of time?! I really wanted to yell that at him, but I had to keep my cool in front of Captain Morgan.

“Hmm? That seems to be news to him,” Morgan said suspiciously.

I responded gravely. “The shock of the incident caused his memory to become... estranged.”

“Estranged? Not lost?!” Morgan asked.

I responded coolheadedly, “That’s the term the doctor used.”



“I see... So that’s it, eh? Aha. I suspect you’re looking for a job and a place to stay, then?”

“No. For a way home,” I responded. “I don’t think there are presently any roads or sea routes I can take to get there, but I still want to try to find something. I just need to ask you one thing—is there a country to the north that abuts a large desert?”

“Hmm... A desert to the north, eh?” Captain Morgan thought a moment. “I’ve no idea myself, but some of the scholars and officials might know. Still, I’m not sure how accommodating they’d be. It says in the letter that you ‘took out a group of bandits with an amazing fire spell,’ but... While we’re grateful for your aid in ridding our country of the bandits that plague it, I don’t think that’s enough to convince our local scholars and officials to offer their aid. And so... would you be willing to aid us first, as to prove what you can do? In a few days, we’ll be embarking on a mission in collaboration with the Knights of the Silver Spear. Due to a shortage of manpower, they’ve had to ask divisions like ours to throw in with them. If you’re as powerful as Bronco claims, I think you could be very useful to us.”

“If this is about waging war with your neighbors, I’ll have to pass. I don’t want to get involved in anything that could make it hard for me to leave later.”

“No worries there. It’s not humans we’re fighting.” A small smile appeared on Morgan’s face. “We’re up against what we call... the Dark Lord of the North.”

...

“Whaaaaat?!” My sudden cry echoed throughout the room.

So, long story short... I slew the Dark Lord of the North.

“What?”

“Wait!”

“What the?!”

These astounded cries came from Captain Morgan, the bigwigs from the Knights of the Silver Spear, and all the others present. I let their reactions go in

one ear and out the other as I investigated the area, keeping Gourry close at hand for any last-minute surprises.

Two days after departing Palbathos, we'd come upon a run-down fortress in the forest. They'd called it the stronghold of the Dark Lord of the North.

You may have put this together already, but this "Dark Lord of the North" that Captain Morgan and the others spoke of wasn't the one we knew. Hearing the name had given me an initial shock, but I'd quickly realized the nature of the misunderstanding.

See, *our* Dark Lord of the North was a piece of Dark Lord Shabranigdu who'd destroyed Aqualord during the Incarnation War a thousand years back and now lay sealed in ice in the Kataart Mountains. But the folks in the outer lands, who'd been cut off from the inner lands just before the Incarnation War, had no way of knowing about *that* Dark Lord of the North, seeing as he hadn't even existed until the final days of the war and all.

Hence, it was safe to assume that what Captain Morgan and company referred to as "the Dark Lord of the North" was really just some magic-wielding something-or-other that lived north of the capital. And, in point of fact...

"Looks like the sorcerer messed up the ritual and ended up setting his circle to auto-summon," I said after investigating the large magic circle we found on the floor of a chamber deep inside the fortress.

The circle's spell-writing had been done incorrectly, causing it to gather magic power from the surroundings over time and activate whenever it reached a certain level. I also spied a skeleton clad in caster's robes in the corner of the room. He must have met with some kind of accident... or maybe he'd met his end when he lost control of one of his creatures. Word to the kids at home: summoning demons isn't all fun and games!

So, yeah, the thing Captain Morgan and crew called "the Dark Lord of the North" turned out to be a single summoned brass demon. Easy pickings compared to the pure demons I'd tangled with in the past, though I wouldn't exactly call it cannon fodder. You could defeat them with mundane weapons, but they had a tough hide, they were strong, and they could use attack spells.

The brass demon's lackeys—or, I guess, just other creatures summoned

alongside it—consisted of about ten or so lesser demons hanging around in the fortress. Lesser demons were weaker than brass demons in pretty much all respects, so your standard band of swordsmen could realistically deal with them so long as they knew what they were up against. Unfortunately, the people of the outer lands seemed to be clueless about attack spells, so they'd probably lost quite a few waves of men to the demons' unfamiliar magics.

As a result, they'd dubbed this ominous foe the Dark Lord of the North.

On the way to the fortress, I'd chatted with the knights and guards. From that, I'd inferred that the so-called Knights of the Silver Spear had been ordered to slay the demon—and they were dragging the Fourth Division along to use as cannon fodder. So, knowing their necks were on the line, Captain Morgan had asked me and Gourry to lead the charge. But while Gourry and I knew demons could be dangerous, we were also pretty used to fighting them by now. After slaying the brass demon at the very end, we then destroyed the still-active summoning circle, and that was that. We made such quick work of 'em that I don't even see the need to go into detail.

To Captain Morgan and the knights, though, the whole thing probably looked like the stuff of legends. The knights had surrounded the fortress at a distance, carefully judging their best moment to attack... Meanwhile, two drifters they'd sent in to draw fire just torched the bad guys lickety-split.

"Wh-Who are you people?!" Morgan croaked after finally regaining his wits. "You bested those demons—and the Dark Lord of the North—each with a single hit!"

"Well, yeah." I shrugged a little. "Bronco told you I was powerful, didn't he?"

Personally, I felt I'd shown a great deal of restraint by not simply blowing up the whole fortress on sight. I guess from the point of view of the outer landers, who were pretty naive to magic, my wide variety of attack spells *was* extremely unusual. I mean, Gourry had actually slain way more demons than me, but my spellcasting must've been way flashier, because I was definitely getting the lion's share of the attention.

Captain Morgan stared at me dumbly. "Well, to be honest, I'd taken his letter with a grain of salt... but now I see you're even more incredible than he said!"

“Why, thanks! Now, about that information I’m after...” I shot him a wink.

And the crowd just stood there, staring at me in shock.

Richly colored tapestries. A thick, exquisitely carved wooden table. A plush sofa made from the finest leather.

“Now... let me start by officially thanking you, Mistress Lina and Master Gourry, for your aid in destroying the Dark Lord of the North the other day,” Captain Morgan said as he beckoned us to sit down.

Two days following our return to Palbathos, Gourry and I had been summoned by Captain Morgan not to the barracks in town, but to a building within the castle complex itself. The whole city was surrounded by a wall, and the castle at its heart was encircled by an even higher one. And when the soldiers came to fetch us from our inn, that was exactly where they’d taken us.

We’d passed through a gate in the castle wall, crossed a large courtyard that looked like training grounds, entered some building, and found ourselves in a chamber at the end of a not-so-long hall. It was a proper meeting room—a big step up from the virtual interrogation room they’d sat us in at the guard station.

Captain Morgan wasn’t the only one present either. In the far right corner of the room, over Morgan’s left shoulder, sat a middle-aged man in an indigo robe embroidered with gold thread. Fully armored soldiers stood on either side of him, as well as on either side of the two doors in the room.

Captain Morgan continued without introducing the robed man. “You did a marvelous job vanquishing those troublesome fiends. The Knights of the Silver Spear also spoke very highly of you.”

“Thanks,” I began with a friendly smile on my face. “But it’s a small price to pay to receive the information I asked for,” I said, taking the lead.

Here, Captain Morgan’s face stiffened slightly. “About that, actually...” His eyes dropped to the table. “I tried my best, but I’m afraid I wasn’t able to learn much. Of course, the investigation is still ongoing, but we need to check through the old scrolls, and it’s probably going to take some time to find an answer. In the meantime, I’m sure it’s inconvenient for you to stay at an inn.

We've prepared a proper residence for you both."

"We appreciate the gesture," I said innocently, standing up from my seat. Gourry joined me. "But we'd hate to impose, so I think we'll just be moving on."

"Please!" Captain Morgan rose from his own seat in panic. "Wait a minute! Is something unsatisfactory?"

"Oh, certainly not. I was just thinking it wouldn't be polite to burden you anymore. And I'm not sure I can afford to sit around either, so I think we'll be on our way to continue our search. See you," I declared, turned around, and headed back to the door we'd come in.

As I did, the two guards standing there moved to block the door.

Aha. Thought so.

I stopped and turned back around. "Captain Morgan, if you didn't have to tell the soldiers to block our way, that means," I said with a bright smile, "this is exactly what it looks like, isn't it?"

The instant I spoke those words, I heard a groan followed by two thuds against the floor.

"Lina!" Gourry called.

"On it!" I turned back to the door and saw it open with the big lug standing next to two fallen soldiers. Naturally, he'd taken them out while everyone's eyes were locked on me—just like we'd discussed in advance. It was an easy feat for a swordsman of his skill.

"What?!" Shocked voices rose up in the room around us, but...

"Later!" With that, Gourry and I dashed out!

"D-Don't let them get away!" someone shouted from the room a moment later. I didn't recognize the voice. Probably the man in the robe.

"Are you sure about this, Lina?!" Gourry asked as we booked it down the hall.

"Perfectly sure!" I responded. I'd expected this to happen. Not that I'd *wanted* it to, mind you.

Here's the skinny on what had likely transpired. Captain Morgan—or rather,

the Kingdom of Luzilte—had decided not to let me leave. He and the knights had passed on word of all the spells I'd used to vanquish the brass demon, and someone in power had decided that keeping me around to boost the nation's magical power was a great idea. If I could teach a few hundred or a few thousand soldiers offensive spells capable of killing lesser demons, after all, it'd make for an army to be reckoned with. On the other hand, if I refused...

Fweeeet! A piercing whistle echoed down the hall.

In response to the sound, two soldiers appeared ahead and drew their swords when they spotted us! As they did, Gourry began charging even faster. I decided to leave the soldiers to him. Meanwhile, I glanced over my shoulder and saw the guards pouring out of the meeting room in pursuit.

But I'd expected this much too. As soon as Gourry and I had hit the hall, I'd begun chanting a spell, and it was just about ready! I placed my right hand on the wall and incanted the words of power! "Van Layl!" Vines of ice sprouted from my hand, slithering along the floor and the ceiling! And the moment they reached the soldiers chasing after us...

Zing! The men froze right over with an audible sound, stopping them in their tracks and blocking off the hall. Given that they were wearing armor, they'd probably pull through alive, if a bit frostbitten.

After making sure that was taken care of, I turned my gaze back to the hall ahead and found that Gourry had already defeated the other two soldiers. Since I hadn't been looking, I couldn't say exactly what he'd done, but given that there was no blood, the men were probably still alive.

We kept on running straight outside.

"Too bad for you." Waiting for us on the training grounds between the building and the wall was a band of armored soldiers. I recognized the man in the middle who called out to us—he was the commander of the Knights of the Silver Spear. "If you'd only agreed to help our kingdom, we could have been tremendous allies. But Mistress Lina... you are simply too strong. If your power were to fall into the hands of another land, it would threaten ours. I must prevent that at any cost."

Yup, there it was. The kingdom had decided that if they couldn't have me and

my fancy magic power, no one could.

Now, in truth, I'd anticipated as much and worked out a rough plan with Gourry ahead of time. Of course, I'd held out hope that they would keep their word, give me the information I wanted, and let me go on my merry way... But the second we'd entered that meeting room, I'd realized it was a pipe dream. It was clear they'd resolved to a capture-or-kill stratagem.

See, those guys in the meeting... they didn't seem exactly hostile, but there was a certain crackling tension around them. There was a chance I was just being overly cautious, however, so I'd decided to hear them out. And big ol' yellow flags like "we don't know how long it'll take" and "we've prepared you a house" turned red when the guards blocked our way out without needing to be told to do so.

That meant they'd gotten their orders in advance: *Don't let them escape, no matter what.*

No way was I giving up on getting home to settle down in this country as their pawn instead. If I did, they'd eventually split me and Gourry up to disincentivize me leaving, and we'd lose touch with each other. And even if I *did* help teach the kingdom magic, once I'd done my part, they might still kill me just to guarantee I'd never turn on them. If whoever was orchestrating this was clever enough, my fate was as good as sealed. In other words, my only chance at freedom was to flee now.

The knights' commander drew his sword with a cold metallic sound.

"I really am sorry... Forgive me." His blade glinted in the sunlight, silver with a tinge of green. "I've seen your powers, Mistress Lina. I know there's nothing you can do if I get too close. So behold... my family heirloom, the magical sword Huelgwilem!"

Um, okaay... I swallowed down a reflexive groan and began chanting a spell.

"Now..." The knight readied himself. "Don't underestimate me, child!" he howled as he ran at us, the sword in his hand flashing!

At the same time, Gourry stepped forward unceremoniously and drew his sword. Then, soundlessly... the knight's sword was sundered near the hilt. The

blade went flying through the air and hit the ground with a clink.

Gourry hadn't broken it. He'd *cut clean through it*.

"What?!"

And as the commander stared in shock—*Thunk!*—Gourry struck him in the back of the neck with the butt of his sword. The blow, aimed right in the gap between his helm and armor, knocked the commander out.

Yeah... Shoulda seen that coming.

It wasn't that the commander sucked or anything. His swordsmanship was pretty cool, in fact. But... dude didn't stand a chance against an ultra-talented swordsman like Gourry. Skill aside, Gourry wielded the legendary Blast Sword, which absorbed nearby magic power to increase its own sharpness. It could even slay pure demons.

And if the commander had been telling the truth, his sword was magical too. In other words, the moment their blades clashed, the commander's sword had only fed the Blast Sword's enchantment. The result was a foregone conclusion. The only way the commander could have come out victorious was to take Gourry out before they ever crossed blades. But given Gourry's skill, that scenario was highly unlikely.

We'd lucked out in that we hadn't been asked to hand over our weapons upon entering the castle complex. They'd probably decided it wouldn't do much good against a spellcaster like me, and that they'd be okay if they just stayed on guard. Of course, if they *had* asked us to disarm, we would've left on the spot.

Seeing their captain defeated in the blink of an eye sent a wave of hesitation through the gathered soldiers. They didn't actually run away, though. They just concentrated their numbers around the gate.

Meanwhile, I sallied over to a part of the wall the soldiers weren't guarding with Gourry in tow. Obviously there was no door there, but I placed my hands against it and... "Blast Wave!"

Crash! The wall around my hands blew outward with a big ol' boom! Blast Wave was a spell that pulverized anything I touched with both hands. The exact results depended on the material, but I could open a human-sized hole in even

castle walls if the conditions were right.

From there, Gourry and I exited into the city.

“We’d better head out, Gourry!”

“Out where?! Where are we going?!”

“North, of course!” I said as we sprinted forward. It was probably safe to assume there were guards posted at our inn already. We’d have to skedaddle without stopping by. I’d left some stuff there, but under the assumption that this would happen, I’d kept my traveling money and most of my important items on my person.

Fweeeeet! Fweeeeet! I could hear whistles all around us. I thought about chucking a few blasty-type spells behind me to slow our pursuers and block the road, but that ran the risk of harming innocent bystanders too.

In that case... I chanted a spell as I ran. “Sight Frang!”

Kwshhh! With audible intensity, a thick mist blossomed around me.

“What?”

“What’s going on?!”

“Wah!”

I could hear cries of surprise from passersby, but the spell I’d cast was purely a smokescreen. I hoped they’d forgive me that much. It would still stymie the soldiers, however, who’d be forced to slow their pace, wary of traps. And while they were doing that, we’d make ourselves scarce!

“Lina!”

“What?!”

“You know the way out?!”

“I figure we’d just run and sort that out later!”

That actually turned out to be a bad move. After running down random winding streets, we soon found ourselves at a dead end.

Of course. The capital was a castle town, after all. The streets were

intentionally sinuous to thwart enemy invasions.

“Lina!”

“Shut up!”

“I wasn’t going to complain. I was just wondering why we can’t use your flight spell.”

“Mmgh,” I grumbled. I’d considered it, but if we flew over the roofs in broad daylight, we’d just draw attention to ourselves, which was kinda the opposite of what we needed right now. “Let’s just run for now!”

“I don’t get it, but okay!”

We turned around and doubled back down the road until we hit a fork, where we took the path we hadn’t chosen before. The city was designed to repel enemy invasion, but they couldn’t make it *too* inconvenient for the people who lived there. Following my instincts, I ran whichever way seemed most promising.

As we darted from one alley onto a wide street, we ran into a group of seven or eight soldiers! *Darn it! They’re here too?!*

“Found them!” they shouted as they drew their blades. I had no obligation to show any mercy to anyone trying to kill me, but these guys were just doing their jobs. They didn’t really have a choice about following orders. I was hoping to spare them, although it was gonna be tough to hold back against so many of them...

One soldier near the back of the group pulled a whistle from his pocket, put it to his mouth, and—before he could blow, a figure descended! *Whomp!* The head of the soldier with the whistle in his mouth rattled unnaturally and he collapsed on the spot. As for his attacker, who’d just jumped down from a rooftop like a cat...

“Ran?!”

“Hey there, Nissy Lina!”

The unexpected ambush sent a new shot of uncertainty through the soldiers. They instinctively looked in Ran’s direction and... that’s when Gourry made his

charge! Some of the men kept their eyes on Ran, and the others turned their attention to Gourry.

“Blast Ash!” I shouted, seizing everyone’s fearful focus at once.

I hadn’t actually chanted a spell, though. I’d just yelled the words. But if the soldiers knew I was a sorcerer who could use offensive magic—especially if any of them had actually been there while I was mowing down lesser and brass demons with Blast Ashes during the whole Dark Lord of the North quest—it was only natural that threat would scare them something awful.

And that moment of distraction was all Gourry and Ran needed!

Knocking out the remaining soldiers didn’t take long at all. Gourry was using body blows and hilt strikes, while Ran was using her hands and her roughly hewn staff. She hadn’t mentioned anything about being the fighting type, but she seemed more than capable.

Still, this was no time to just sit back and admire her in action. We’d dealt with the soldiers in front of us, but it was broad daylight out with tons of witnesses. And for the law-abiding people of the town, we undoubtedly looked like the villains right now. It was only a matter of time before they reported us. We couldn’t stick around for long!

As I took off, Gourry—and Ran, for some reason—followed suit. I said in a rather chastising tone as she ran beside me, “What are you doing?”

“That’s my line!”

“Fair enough! The military types here wanted to exploit my spellcasting ability, so I had to run away, and here we are! So why’d you join in?!”

We’d been doing our own things during the day but staying at the same inn to have breakfast and dinner together. I was under the impression she was mostly sightseeing, but...

“I happened to be passing by when I saw you and Rostir Gourry attacked by bad guys! So I got mad and attacked them, and they turned out to be soldiers!”

“That’s crazy!”

“That’s how I roll!”

“Then stop rolling that way!”

“Eh heh heh! I hear that a lot.”

“Then listen for once!”

I hadn't wanted to get her involved, but now that she was, I couldn't just tell her to back off. She'd been staying at the inn with us, sharing meals with us, and now she'd been seen beating up soldiers with us. There was no getting out of that one. If we left her in town, she'd end up in a bad way for sure.

“Guess we're going on the run together!”

“Yeppo!”

“Why do you look so happy?! Anyway, you've been walking around the city every day, right? Can you navigate us to the outer wall? There doesn't have to be a gate!”

“You wanna go to a wall without a gate?”

“We're gonna break through it!”

“Righty-o!”

I know I'm not one to talk, but there's something wrong with someone who hears “we're gonna bust through a wall” and responds with “righty-o!”

Anyway... that's how me, Gourry, and Ran ended up as fugitives.

3: On the Run, with Glimpses of Pursuers Behind

The sun had begun sinking behind the mountains. About the time the whole world was painted in orange, we were finishing up our early dinner.

“I never knew you were such a skilled fisher, Nissy Lina!” Ran declared with a satisfied smile as she polished off her third of the catch I’d reeled in. We were currently seated on some convenient rocks at the riverside.

“Ahh, it’s actually got nothing to do with skill. I used magic,” I responded.

Using strands of my own hair, an ordinary branch, and a fishing hook I carry around for just such occasions, I’d made an impromptu fishing rod. Onto this I’d cast my “bite-at-every-cast” (proper name pending) spell and gone to town.

The “bite-at-every-cast” spell is a Lina Inverse original I’d made up ages ago by toying around with some magic fundamentals. The key was that it made the fish think the empty hook looked super tasty. I’d initially conceived the spell in hopes that, if cast on a person, they’d be enchanted into finding even the diciest of trail rations delicious when forced to camp outside, although that had never quite worked out. I could trick myself into thinking the food looked good, sure, but fooling my taste buds was a different story.

I’d thus repurposed the spell into a nifty fishing number. That said, the fact that it was actually a recycled failure, plus the fact that it had the power to make river fish extinct if it got out, plus the fact that catching fish too easily paradoxically took the fun out of the endeavor... Yeah, that all made me not want to use it very often. Given our current situation, however—specifically being on the run as wanted fugitives—it was a handy way to get the three of us fed in a speedy fashion.

After Ran, Gourry, and I had escaped from Palbathos, we’d hiked a little ways north up the main road from the city, then entered a forest off the beaten path and headed eastward into uncharted terrain. The kingdom surely had a search party out looking for us right now, and we’d asked Captain Morgan about the land to the north. They were bound to assume we were traveling that way,

meaning they'd station soldiers all along the roads and send fast riders ahead to put up wanted posters in every town.

But I'd heard that there was a ravine to the east of the capital with no major roads leading straight to it, so we'd headed thataway. And, lo and behold, while moving through the forest, we'd hit a ravine... not quite sheer, but pretty steep, with a large river running down the middle. There, I took my companions on a short flight to the other side courtesy of a Levitation spell. With that, even if our pursuers were using dogs to track our scent, they'd lose us at the ravine.

Following that, we kept traveling east until the first hues of evening began to show themselves. We then decided to stop for the night at the next river we hit, feast on fresh-caught fish, and sleep under the stars.

"By the way..." We were sitting among the trees by the riverside when I turned to Ran. "First off, sorry to get you mixed up in all this."

"No prob!"

"That was fast! Do you understand the situation we're in here, Ran?!"

"Think so, yeah!"

Really, that was way too fast... Does she ever give anything a second thought? I wasn't sure if it was just her personality or if it was the way she talked that made her come off that way.

"I mean... to put it bluntly, Luzilte is most likely gonna be after you from now on too."

"Sure will!"

"Uh..." I scratched at the side of my head but decided to drop it for the time being. "Okay then... Now, as for our next step, I'd like to hear how you feel, Ran. Do you want to keep traveling with us for a while or split up?"

"With—" she began to say with a beaming smile and a raise of her left hand, but I stopped her.

"Hanganhanganhangon! Will you *please* stop answering questions based on pure lizard brain? First, let's say you come with us. I promise we'd do our best to get you out of this kingdom in one piece, but if our pursuers catch us on the

way, they're definitely gonna assume you're in cahoots with us. On the other hand, say we go our separate ways. They're a lot less likely to track you down if you're on your own since *we're* the ones they're really after. The hitch is that if they do find you and you can't talk your way out of it, you'll have to bust out on your own. So, with all that in mind, what will you do?"

"Stick with you!"

Did... she even rrrreally think about it?

While I looked at her suspiciously, Ran continued, her lackadaisical smile unchanged, "If I go with you, I can always say 'let's split up after all' later, but if we split up now, that's that."

"Wait, you actually thought it through?!"

"I hear that a lot!"

"Okay, I guess we're hanging out a little while longer, then. Once we get out into the next kingdom, our pursuers shouldn't be able to move as openly, so Gourry and I will do our best to help you until then. But if you do decide you want to split up at any point, just say the word."

"Thanks! But Nissy Lina..." Ran began with a joking tone and mischievous gaze. "You said you're going home, but if you can use magic so powerful it gets a kingdom after you, why don't you just make your own country here?"

"Ahaha. Heck no," I said, waving a hand dismissively. "I couldn't do that, and even if I could, it'd just be a huge pain in the butt. It's my style to brush off trouble that comes my way... then chase down the source of the trouble and make sure it never causes trouble again. I don't cause commotions because I *like* it."

"Uhhh..." For some reason, Gourry, who was sitting opposite Ran, sounded skeptical.

I slooowly turned to face him. "Hmmmmmm?"

But the menace I exuded didn't faze the big lug in the slightest. He simply sighed and replied, "Okay, I get it. You tell yourself you don't like it. But this is why stuff steps past you out of clear revulsion, you know?"

“Don’t say ‘clear revulsion’!”

“Clear revulsion?” Ran cocked her head, not getting the reference.

“Ah, anyhoo...” I cleared my throat, then said, “We’ll spend the night here and continue east tomorrow. We should eventually hit a village or town, and if there’s a route north from there, we’ll probably take that. But there’s something we need to take care of before we get there.”

“Whazzat?” Ran asked.

I gave her a firm nod and answered, “Disguises.”

Houses lined a north-south road against a mountain backdrop. Behind them were rectangular fields carved into the gentle slopes, and behind those stood rows of well-tended trees. I couldn’t be sure since they weren’t bearing fruit at the moment, but judging from their leaves, they looked like orange trees of some sort.

It was now late morning the day after we fled Palbathos. We’d gotten around to the road that led into town from the north and followed it south to civilization.

“Hello!” I called cheerfully to the villagers farming in the fields.

The locals stared at us. For a minute, they looked suspicious. Which was fair enough, given how we were dressed.

Wanted posters would likely start circulating even this far out in the not-to-distant future. Such posters occasionally had likenesses on them, but they were more often just lists of key features. So, given said features they were likely to list, a simple disguise to make you *just different enough* would do the trick.

By that logic, I’d removed my cape and pauldrons. I’d then wrapped my pauldrons and other gear up in the cape, which I was carrying over my shoulder with the lining facing out. I’d also more or less swapped outfits with Ran. Gourry had also removed his distinctive armor, which he was carrying in a bundle at the end of Ran’s staff. And for the finishing touch, we’d braided our hair in a loop around our necks. I figured the hairstyle would be so weird that it’d distract anyone from paying too much attention to our faces.

“Ah, hello there,” one of the villagers, an older man nearby, responded to me after a pause.

Here I raised my voice and asked, “Would this be Midalka Village?”

He took a moment before replying, “Come again?”

“I asked if this was Midalka.”

The old man was silent a long time, then said, “No, this’s Moss Village.”

“Eh?” I blurted out. I made a show of pulling a parchment from my breast pocket, going into a huddle with Gourry and Ran, and whispering with them. Obviously, I was only pretending to be lost. “Midalka” was a name I’d made up, and I’d discussed this little act with Ran and Gourry beforehand.



After a play at talking things over, I scratched my head and turned back to the man. “Moss Village, eh? Are you sure?”

“Pretty sure,” he responded skeptically.

I looked back at the (blank) roll of parchment in my hand. “Huh. That’s weird... Where are we, then? Eh...?” I acted confused for quite a while. “So... do you know how to get to Midalka?”

“Never heard of it, I’m afraid.”

“Eh?” Head tilted, I finally pointed south. “Um... Okay, if you don’t mind my asking, what’s the name of the next village down the way?”

“You’ll come to Danalov Village first, then Lanase Village. Past that is Ladamount, and if you go southwest at the crossroads, hit a fork, take that right path, cross a bridge, and meet up with the road, you’ll be on your way to the capital, Palbathos.”

There was no direct route east from Palbathos, so you apparently had to take a long southern detour if you wanted to join up with the main road that headed there.

I hummed and this time pointed to the north road. “And what about thataway?”

“The towns of Analov and Alibaro, and past them, a fairly large city called Lanoma,” he responded helpfully without reserve.

Gourry, Ran, and I huddled up and began discussing again—or pretended to. “All right,” I said, turning back to the old man at last. “I guess we’ll head for, um... Palbathos, was it? Oh, but first, do you have any food and clothing here to spare? Supplies will be more expensive in the capital, no?”

Obviously there was no way in hell we were really heading for Palbathos, but *saying* that we were meant that if anyone came to town asking about strangers passing through, the villagers would tell ’em we were southbound for the capital. Hopefully that’d get them off the trail. Naturally, we’d leave along the south road to keep up appearances, then take a turn off the beaten path and double back north.

At my request, the man laughed. “I’ve been to the capital before, and everything really is pricey there. So let me show you to a good shop. I can attest that the prices are reasonable—just don’t expect any matching sets.”

“Thanks! You’re a real help!” I bowed low to the man.

And that’s how we scored some provisions for the near future and some even better disguises.

Beams stained black with soot. Tables dark and shiny from use but clearly well cared for and smooth to the touch. Lamps hanging from the ceiling. And a house at about eighty percent capacity.

“Sorry for the wait! I’ve got a hot salad and red duck pate, and tradia black chicken steamed in winter melon cream sauce!”

“Yeaah!” As the waitress filled the table with dishes, Ran, Gourry, and I let out a chorus of appreciation.

Freshly caught and salt-grilled fish wasn’t so bad, but there was no beating a proper meal. We’d eaten well in Palbathos... but this restaurant’s offerings were almost *too* lavish. The variety of colors across the plates and the food, the balance of the various vegetables, and the vases with edible flowers on the tables for accent added a luster to the place that was easy to see even by the low lamplight.

“Well, then...”

“Let’s eat!”

Knives and forks flashed as we brought the food to our mouths.

Wow, that’s delicious! Normally, colorful vegetables and garnishes didn’t add to the flavor and impeded the mouthfeel of a meal, so I skipped them... but not so at this place. Even the edible flower petals, which I’d assumed were just there for presentation, added a sweet aroma and a slightly bitter accent when eaten with the food.

Pretty impressive, really... I found myself getting so carried away that when we finally paused to take a breather, the food was all gone. *Uh-oh. We forgot to*

hold our planning meeting! So we ordered some drinks to chase down dinner, and...

“Okay, let’s talk next moves,” I said, taking a sip of something called natall juice that the waitress had just brought me. It had a peach-like flavor and an invigorating aroma, and it was neither too sweet nor had too strong of an aftertaste. But flavor aside... “I figure we’ll just keep heading north for now.”

Earlier that day, after acquiring food and clothing in Moss Village, we’d slipped out south as planned and, from there, headed north through another uncharted forest. Eventually, we’d come to the city of Lanoma that the old man had mentioned. It was about as big as Maricida where we’d stopped before, but this place had bigger buildings. The inn we’d picked out was three stories.

Obviously we’d changed into proper disguises before entering town. We were now dressed in the clothes we’d picked up in Moss, and I had my hair pulled back in twin tresses, while Gourry’s was in a ponytail, and Ran’s was in twin buns. Gourry and I had the full traveler look going on, but Ran, who was already dressed like a girl running away from home... still kinda looked the same. Nevertheless, we’d shaken things up enough to fool any pursuers who didn’t know us on sight.

Now, it was entirely possible that no one was after us after all and I was taking pains for no reason—but that was a risk I was willing to take. It was better than letting our guard down and potentially finding ourselves surrounded. Our disguises would thwart most suspicion, and acting so brazenly, paradoxically, would allow us to blend in better.

And so we’d brazenly arrived in this town, brazenly rented a room at an inn, brazenly asked if there was anywhere good to eat nearby, and brazenly arrived here. *Thanks for the recommendation, Mr. Innkeep!* What a huge score that turned out to be. Under normal circumstances, I would’ve ordered more and tried to brave the entire menu, but...

“Obviously, we can’t afford to stand out too much,” I said, partly as a reminder to myself.

It would’ve been too sad if I outed us because I got careless with my eating. Getting careless with my magic was out of the question too. But by the same

token, as long as I kept my wits about me and changed up my disguise every now and then, we could probably get through this. I still didn't have any idea how we were gonna get home, but we could make it out of the country without too much hassle. At least, that was my thought.

Ah, how naive I was...

The sky was bright with a full moon and stars as we left the restaurant.

I'd read once in some old record a long time ago that stars looked different in different parts of the world. It didn't say how, exactly, or if you could discern your location based on that, though. Too bad. If such clues were to be found in the starry sky, that would've been *very* useful to us.

Lanoma's main road seemed to grow more populous as the sun went down. A great many people were out eating or drinking. There were no streetlamps, but there were shops all around with lanterns hanging out front. Some had five or six, and some had ten or more. It was probably a ploy to make the stores look more inviting to customers, but I was a little concerned about the fire hazard. Some were putting out a lot of black smoke, perhaps fueled by poor quality oil.

Either way, thanks to all the lanterns, we had no trouble finding our footing as we walked along. But at the same time, the brightly lit main avenue made the branching alleyways seem all the darker and more menacing.

Our inn was just a short walk down the main drag from the restaurant we'd hit up for dinner. When we got back, I called to the old man at reception, picked up the keys to our rooms, and...

"Say, mister, we're heading up for the night. Could I borrow a lamp?"

The old man hesitated a moment, then said, "Ah. Sure." He took one off the shelf behind him, lit it from the lamp at his desk, and handed it over.

With that in hand, I turned to Ran and Gourry. "Okay, you two, mind coming to my room? We need to talk a bit."

"Sure thing."

"Okaaay!"

And so we all went up to the third floor. There were dim lamps illuminating the stairs and halls, but individual guest rooms didn't have their own lights as a fire prevention measure. The setup was that if you really needed a light, you could borrow one from reception.

I unlocked the door to my room, set the lamp inside, packed up my things, and darted back into the hall. I then watched as Gourry did the same in the room next to mine, and Ran from the one across the way. I silently pointed at Ran's room, and they nodded in silent agreement. Gourry and I closed our doors and the three of us headed into Ran's room. After waiting a while for our eyes to adjust to the dark...

"Time to split, huh?" I asked in a whisper. I saw two silhouettes nod in response.

Our pursuers had arrived. All the way from the restaurant back to the inn, I'd sensed something lurking nearby, watching us. That, combined with the old receptionist's attitude when we got back, told me we were under threat. Gourry and I were used to this stuff, of course, but I was a little surprised by how quickly Ran, who seemed so scatterbrained, had picked up on the situation.

I didn't know how the pursuers had found us, but I wanted to get away more than I wanted an answer to that question. If they were watching my room from outside the inn, lamplight was now visible through the small crack in my window. I hoped they'd stay focused on that, but...

I chanted a spell under my breath and opened Ran's window to the night outside. I took her hand and Gourry's, then whispered, "Levitation."

We hovered out the window and into the night air. The skies above were aglow with the moon and stars, and the streets below were flooded with light from the various storefronts. We floated over the roof, until...

"?!"

I think all three of us realized it simultaneously. On top of a nearby house, a hooded figure stood as if to block our way. Their robe was dark enough that I couldn't make out its particular hue in the black of night. They wore their hood low over their eyes, and a mask covering their face below that. I couldn't

discern their age or gender, but it was clear this encounter was no mere coincidence.



It would've been hard to react quickly while using Levitation, so I called it off and... the second I did, the robed figure fired a spear of light at me! Thankfully, because I'd just dropped down to the roof instead of hanging in the air, it sailed over my head. *Bwoosh!* It hit the building behind me—the wall of the inn—shattering it explosively!

Wait, was that an attack spell?! I didn't think anybody knew those out here... I had a ton of questions about the caster's identity, but now wasn't exactly the time for an interview!

While muttering an incantation, I sprinted across the roof toward the robed figure. Gourry ran to my right, picking up speed as he got ahead of me.

“—!”

I heard an unknown male voice drifting on the night breeze—presumably the robed figure chanting some kind of spell. A ball of illumination, like lamplight, appeared before him at about eye level. It then split into five globes headed straight for Gourry!

A wide-area attack against someone running on an uneven surface like a roof was a raw deal. But Gourry dodged each orb as easily as if he were skipping through a field, quickly closing the distance on the caster. He pulled his sword just as he drew near...

But the robed man leaped—no, he flew! He sailed straight up, his speed only increasing as he did, then stopped midair out of sword's reach.

Using a flight spell right after an attack spell?! That was way too fast for a chant... Or does he have an ally close by who cast it for him?!

The robed figure in the air looked down at Gourry, who'd come to a stop. Then...

“It's not over yeeet!” Ran took off running! “Everyone knows...” She got right under the robed man. “...that staffs...” She thrust her staff upward with both hands. “...are longer than swords!”

But it didn't reach.

“Heh,” the man snorted. But just then—*Whom!*—he was blown straight

upward! “Gwuh?!” he shouted as he flew.

I had no idea what Ran had done, but... “Now’s our chance to beat it!” I cried, running along the roof and jumping down at a random point. Gourry and Ran followed suit.

The man in the robe, still hovering above, muttered something...

Another spell chant?! While he’s still controlling his flight spell?

The next instant, five balls of flame appeared around him!

Is this guy serious? We’re in the middle of a city!

Even if he was bluffing, I had to act like he wasn’t—so I fired my spell. “Freeze Arrow!”

The ten arrows of cold I produced flew straight toward the robed man overhead. In response, he launched his fireballs. One of them collided with a frigid bolt, and—*Fwooom!*—an inferno blossomed across the night sky! A moment later, the other fireballs did the same close to me! *Babababwoom!* Flames raced over wooden walls and roof.

These weren’t like the Fireballs I knew that exploded on impact; they were more like literal balls of fire. They didn’t have the power to instantly reduce anything they hit to ash, but they sure did a good job setting the wooden houses ablaze! I gotta say, though... if he’d unleashed them to counter my Freeze Arrow, his aim was piss poor.

I took off down a side alley with Gourry and Ran behind me. There was no follow-up attack from the robed man. As I suspected, the brightness of the conflagration he’d started made it impossible for him to track us through the umbra of the backstreets.

And so we continued our escape through the night-cloaked city.

In the end, we made it out without any signs of further pursuit.

Dawn broke over the unfamiliar land the next morning. With the sunrise, birds—at least, what I *assumed* were birds—started singing. At first I thought they sounded like the ones from back home, but when I listened a bit closer,

their songs were different from what I knew. Some of them sounded downright like ominous cackling... What in the world made that noise?

Following the prior night's hubbub and our subsequent flight, Gourry, Ran, and I had been forced to camp out in the forest. We'd gotten a delicious meal out of our short stay in Lanoma, but we were now out the lodging fee for three rooms for the night (paid in advance). We made do for breakfast once again out of the rations we'd picked up in Moss Village.

The biscuits—at least, what had been sold to us as biscuits—were twice as hard and half as good as what you'd expect when hearing that word. But hey, they were dirt cheap, so I wasn't going to complain. We could get them down with some boiled water from the river nearby, but it was less like a nice morning meal and more like a nutritional supplement. Not that we had a lot of other options under the circumstances.

"Now..." After finishing breakfast, I let out a sigh before addressing my two companions. "After all that work to disguise ourselves and stay off the beaten path... it's a mystery how our pursuers found us."

We'd taken so many precautions, yet we'd been discovered so easily. Until we knew how they'd done it, the same thing was likely to keep happening.

"How they found us, huh?" Gourry made a big show of contemplating the matter, then said, "What do you think, Lina?"

"Right back on me, huh?! Were you just *pretending* to think, Gourry?"

"Of course not. I asked myself, 'If I think it over, am I gonna come up with an answer?' And the answer was 'no way in heck.' So I asked you."

"That's basically not thinking!"

There, Ran cheerily raised her right hand, still holding her staff protectively in her left. "Ooh! Me, me, me!"

"Go for it, Ran," I said, calling on her.

"Okay!" She rocketed to her feet in an at-attention posture, and proclaimed, "I suspect me!"

"Huuuuh?!" Gourry and I cried in unison at her unexpected take.

“Why?!” I couldn’t help asking.

“Well, Nissy Lina and Rostir Gourry knew each other in advance. That only leaves me! Pretty likely culprit, huh?” she responded brightly (for some reason).

“Point taken...”

“In addition—”

“There’s more?!”

“—the fact that I’m acknowledging that I seem suspicious might *itself* be a plan to throw suspicions off me! Ooooooh, so cunning!”

“Fair enough,” I said.

At this, she puffed her cheeks out sulkily. “You’re not taking me seriously, Nissy Lina!”

I groaned in exhaustion.

The truth was... Yeah, okay. Ran admitting she was suspicious *could* have been a plan to divert suspicion. She sounded like a bubblehead at times, but perhaps that belied her intellect. If I’m being honest, though, I didn’t take her for a great mole. If she worked for the Kingdom of Luzilte, that meant she was under orders from someone we’d met prior to encountering her... in other words, Bronco of Maricida City or one of his compatriots. But if that were the case, her magical abilities would’ve made her a shoo-in for their mission to investigate and take out whatever took out the bandits. Plus, even if Ran *were* the mole, I still had no idea how she was contacting our pursuers. That’s not to say I trusted her unconditionally, however.

I let out a soft sigh. “Well, I’ll keep you a suspect in the back of my mind.”

“Kay!” Ran nodded in satisfaction. I wasn’t sure what she was so pleased about.

Anyway, putting her aside... In the inner realm where magic techniques were widely studied, it was possible to make a mark on a magic item and track its location from the astral plane. But out here, it was hard to believe anyone had the know-how to do that. On the flip side, however, it was entirely possible they had spells that I knew nothing about. Speaking of...

“That reminds me, Ran. Last night, what was that spell you used to give the robed guy a good whack?” I asked.

She blinked in confusion. “Oh, didn’t I tell you? An elf taught it to me.”

“Huh? I thought that was a spell to extend a jump...” I remembered seeing her use it to leap aboard the bas boat.

“What? Ohhh...” She smiled, seemingly in realization. “It’s the same spell.”

“Is it?” I scowled. They were both wind spells, most likely—one using wind to carry you further and the other to push your opponent away—but to say they were the same thing was a bit of an overstatement.

“Yup, same spell! Lemme cast it right now.” Ran began chanting.

Magic required an incantation of chaos words to call upon the power of preternatural forces... That was apparently the same in both the inner and outer lands, and I detected no dialectical difference between what Ran used and what I knew. *Wait... hmm?* While she was chanting, she grasped a handful of grass in her right hand, then threw it over her head.

“Wind Breath!” When Ran released the words of power, the grass she’d tossed—rather than getting carried off by the wind or falling back on the ground—began to float lightly around her. “See?”

Ran grabbed my hand unceremoniously and put her arm around my shoulders. I didn’t feel a breeze or anything, but the grass drifting around her changed course as she moved.



“Now watch this...”

Ran released me, then turned toward a faraway tree and thrust out her staff. The tree was definitely too far for her to hit, but in that instant, the grass floating around suddenly rushed out. Flowing over her outstretched staff, it rushed for the trunk of the targeted tree and...

Whoom! The trunk shook audibly in the wind, the impact causing leaves to rustle and fall.

“It makes the wind help me in lots of good ways!”

“Wait, wait. Hang on a minute here,” I quickly interrupted. I’d heard her chaos words. And I understood the magical principles at play here—which made what I was seeing all the more baffling to me. “Help you in a lot of good ways? That spell... You wreath yourself in the wind, which you can use to accelerate, attack, or defend, depending on the situation?”

“Yeeeeup!”

“Hang on, hang on, hang on...” A single spell for offense, defense, or support, all based on the user’s will in the moment? How was that possible?! Normal spells manifested power to a single simple end, or combined two or three simple ends for a more complex effect.

Take Flare Arrow, for example. You conjure fire, and you send it flying. Simple. And combining types of power and commands—like “create a barrier from wind blowing backward to propel us” and “create lift to repel us from the ground”—gets you magic like my high-speed flight spell, Lei Wing. But how many elements would you have to combine to get a spell that “helps in lots of good ways”? It was unthinkable. Including all those detailed instructions would result in one hell of an incantation, if nothing else, but Ran’s hadn’t even been particularly long. What should’ve been the longest part was replaced with a single phrase...

“Ran! There was a part of your chant that went ‘with the guardianship of the Dragon of Sky, of one with and a piece of the True Dragon.’ Does that mean... your spell borrows the power of Airlord?!”

Airlord Valwin was one of the four Dragon Lords which Flare Dragon Ceifeed

had split his power into. The inner lands were cut off from Earthlord, Flarelord, and Airlord, so magic that called upon them was foreign to us. But when I stopped to think about it... it would be perfectly at home here in the outer lands!

“Yah!” Ran responded easily.

As a sorcerer, I was dying to know more! “Ran! Teach me that spell!” I implored her fervently, spurred on by pure curiosity.

“Hmm...” With a stern expression, she replied, “Kay... but the elf who taught it to me said that affinity mattered a ton when it comes to using it... and when you first try it, it’ll be super blurk no matter what.”

“Blurk?” I parroted, not grokking her meaning.

She nodded. “Yeah. When you cast the spell and think ‘I want to run really fast,’ the wind will start pushing you under your feet.”

“Yeah? Yeah?”

“If your feet can’t keep up and you fall, it’ll smoosh you into the ground.”

“What?!”

“So it’s very blurk!”

“That’s more than just ‘blurk’!”

“Maybe, yah. It was super tough for me at first!”

I had to wonder... was this spell actually, in fact, useless? I had some questions for the elf who’d decided to teach it to space-case Ran too. I would’ve loved to meet them. It was impressive Ran had learned to use the spell so well, but I wasn’t really feeling up to giving it a try myself under the circumstances.

“Well, could you teach me the form of the spell, at least? I suspect it’ll be worse than ‘blurk’ for me if I mess up, so I probably won’t use it, but I’d like to study it.”

“Sure thing. Lessee...”

“Oh, um, not right this instant. Once things have calmed down a little. For now, we should probably head out,” I said, but...

“Ooh! Me, me, me!” Ran raised her hand again.

“Yes, Ran?”

“We still haven’t figured out how our pursuers found us!”

“That’s true, but much as I hate to say it... when you give a question all your brainpower and still can’t come up with an answer, it’s probably time to move on. Getting too bogged down trying to figure things out can be ultimately counterproductive.”

It was possible our pursuers had just stumbled upon us through sheer dumb luck, after all. Most of the men who’d been a party to the conquest of the Dark Lord of the North (lame version) had worn helmets, so it’s possible they could recognize me when I didn’t recognize them. Maybe we’d just passed one of those guys in Lanoma City.

“So, which way do we go?” Ran asked.

I mulled a few things over and answered, “We could head east or west for a while... but I think they’ll find us sooner or later even then, so we might as well go straight north. I’d prefer to avoid any big trouble, but I’m willing to brute force things if it gets us out of this kingdom.”

“Resorting to force as usual, huh?” Gourry said with a sigh.

“Oh, come on. All I’m saying is the world isn’t all about brain *or* brawn, but the balance between brain *and* brawn. Isn’t that right?” I said, striding up to Gourry and getting in his face.

“Er... Uh... I mean,” Gourry said, flinching in response.

“Striking that balance is another application of brains. If you think something over and realize that brawn is the way to go, you use brawn.”

“Aha. So brute force is the *real* big-brain maneuver!”

“No, that’s not quite what I said... Whatever. Let’s move out.”

“Right!” Gourry and Ran responded in hearty agreement.

The sky was blue. The clouds were white. The biscuits were tough.

“Tough.”

“Totally tough.”

“It’s kinda scary.”

Me, Gourry, and Ran sat amid the windswept grassland, crunching down on our ultra-tough biscuits. It had been four days since the attack in Lanoma. And, surprising as it was, we’d yet to see signs of pursuers again.

I’d assumed at first that if we kept following the main road north, they’d catch up to us right away. We’d put up a fight—not hard enough to kill anyone, but enough to set them back. Then the guys whose butts we’d kicked would run home and report in, but even if they formed a new band to come after us, it would take them a while to catch up again. In the meantime, we could press straight northward or take a detour. Rinse and repeat until we reached the border.

That was the plan, but so far, we’d been walking scot-free. It was possible we were still being followed and our pursuers were just waiting for us to let our guard down, though. So, with that in mind, we’d leisurely elected to stay at an inn last night... But even then, nothing.

Thus our journey continued until we reached a small village called Renihorn. The town before it had set a precedent for good grub, but it was a little too early to eat when we got there and we couldn’t afford to sightsee until lunchtime. And so we’d decided to keep going until the next village. We’d accordingly hit Renihorn about noon, but it turned out nowhere in town offered a proper meal. With little other option, we’d bought some rations from a little shack of a shop and were now dining on the flavorless meal in the grasslands outside of the village.

“Lina, try some of this jerky too. It’s tough,” Gourry offered.

“You said it. This stuff may not fill the stomach, but it kinda fills the heart.”

“Nissy Lina, I think that’s heartburn.”

And so, we ate in peace and quiet (or maybe quiet rage) until... Gourry stood up without a sound.

“What’s wrong? Finally had enough of how tough this stuff is?” I asked... and then I heard it. Something was coming closer. It was approaching from the south, and I knew that rumbling sound—it was countless hoofbeats pounding the earth!

“This way!” I shouted, leaping to my feet and making a break for the nearby forest.

“We’re running?!” Gourry asked as he ran beside me.

“We’ll meet them out here!” I said back, then turned to Ran, who was of course running with us too. “Ran, you stay hidden and don’t interfere!”

“Aw, but—”

“I’ve gotten you mixed up in enough! I’m not dragging you into more!”

I wasn’t exactly thrilled with Luzilte, but they weren’t some evil kingdom. I didn’t approve of their methods, but they were doing what they deemed necessary in the name of national security. Plus, the knights and soldiers they were sending after us were just guys following orders. Now, I had no problem defending myself if they picked a fight, but Ran here was just along for the ride... It felt wrong to set her busting up more or less innocent heads.

“I’ll just watch then,” she whispered reluctantly before obediently running to the edge of the forest and hiding behind a tree.

Meanwhile, Gourry and I turned to face what was coming. Close to twenty mounted knights appeared from beyond the village. They must have caught sight of us, because the guy in front raised his hand and called, “Halt!”

Aha. I know that voice.

The cavalry stared us down from a good ways off. It would’ve been quite a distance to cover by foot, but a horse could do it in the blink of an eye.

“I’ve found you, outlaws!” The knight at the head of the squad—I didn’t know his name, but he was the commander of the Knights of the Silver Spear—called in our direction.

I see. We’re finally getting the outlaw treatment...

“I hear you caused some trouble in Lanoma City yesterday. You terrified the

good-hearted locals, you know! The penalty for terrorizing innocent people is steep!”

“It was *your* assassin who raised hell in Lanoma!” I shouted back at the angry captain.

“*Our* assassin? Enough of your lies!”

It sounded like he was the one spouting BS to me, but I had to consider that the assassin may have been under someone else’s orders. Perhaps Commander Silver Spear here really was none the wiser. Either way, I clearly wasn’t talking him down. Which meant I had only one recourse...

I chanted a spell under my breath.

“Such blatant deceit in an attempt to evade the law is a terrible evil! We shall show no mercy! Knights, surround them!”

At his word, the knights began to fan out... but all too late! Before the commander had given the order, I’d finished my spell chant. I knelt down in place, laid my right hand on the ground, and released the words of power! “Vu Vrima!” The earth rumbled and shook. The field where we’d been sitting earlier roiled and swelled until a giant human form burst out.

Vu Vrima beseeched earth spirits called bephemoths to craft a powerful creature known as a golem. They were on the slow side and could only follow simple orders, but they sure were handy in the right situation. And I was willing to bet this was the first time the knights had ever seen a clay giant form from the very earth warping—because they immediately fell into a panic.

“What is this?!”

“A giant?”

“What a hideous creature!”

“This can’t be real!”

The unnerved men whipped their reins around in fright, causing their horses to whinny in confusion. Soon, my golem—looking rather fluffy from the grassland he was made of—was complete!

“Golem!” And then I gave my order! “Dance!”

Creeeeak... Heeding my command, the golem began waving its arms and legs, earth creaking audibly.

I, uh, guess it was *technically* a dance, but I wasn't so much upset with the bephemoths' choreography as I was with myself for making them do that. Anyhoo, to the knights, my creation remained a sight of sheer terror.

"Don't be daunted! Hold your ranks!" The commander raised his voice in desperation, but his men were in no state to listen.

I took advantage of the chaos, and... "Freeze Arrow!" The dozen frigid bolts I fired landed among the band of already panicking knights. *Sorry if I hit any of you nice horsies!* Screams rose up, the chaos spread, and I started chanting another spell.

"C-Curse you!" The commander glared at me, but he wasn't about to charge and leave his men without a leader. Plus, I had Gourry at my side and—

"Lina!"

It all happened in the blink of an eye. Gourry's cry. A flash of hostility. Gourry leaping toward me, grabbing me with both arms...

Bwoooooosh!

...and a crimson flame ripping forth!

Someone had taken advantage of the chaos to launch a fire spell at me from my flank, and Gourry, who'd realized it not a second too late, had saved me. The flames struck the trunk of a tree, scorching its foliage and the grass below. Waves of heat stroked my cheek and tousled my hair, but it wasn't hot enough to be painful. "Thanks, Gourry!"

He set me down, and I looked in the direction the attack had come from. My eyes fell on a red-robed figure standing among the trees.

Is that... the guy from Lanoma City?! Had he intended to catch me unawares while I was focused on the knights?

"Curse you! You have other allies?!" the commander shouted angrily as he watched.

I mean, that attack was obviously meant for me, right?! Still, even if

Commander Doofus had misread the situation, his surprise was a sure indicator that the knights didn't know the robed guy. Which meant... my first goal was to inspire a little friendly fire!

"Gourry! The robed guy first!"

"Right!"

We took off running for the robed guy in the forest!

"Don't let them get away!" Perhaps believing we were trying to rendezvous with a comrade, the commander howled and jerked at his horse's reins. The beast was still too spooked by the dancing golem and the fire, however, and refused to comply. Finally losing his temper, the commander dismounted and ordered for his men to do the same. "Follow me!"

Ahead of me, the red-robed figure. Behind me, the pursuing knights.

In other words, Gourry and I were smack between them! If the robed man fired at us and we dodged, he'd hit his own allies. This would keep him in check and make him think twice about—

He attacked?!

The robed man produced a ball of light, from which five or six rays broke out and streaked toward us! It was what he'd used in Lanoma. *I knew it was the same guy!* But back then, we were stuck trying to dodge on a rooftop. Now we were on flat ground, even if it *was* a little pulpy from my golem-summoning. Evading this time would be a cinch!

To that end, Gourry and I leaped to either side... And then I heard the knights scream behind me.

So he doesn't care about hitting his buddies?!

At that same moment, I sensed a new wave of hostility. I reflexively looked toward the source and spied a second robed figure standing among the trees a little way away. This one already had a dozen spears of light conjured and ready to launch. Had they been planning to hit me as I dodged the obvious attack?!

Robe No. 2 went to fire—*Crack!*—but before they could, they let out a cry of pain. Ran had come running up from the side and whacked them with her staff.

Judging by their voice, Robe No. 2 was a woman. Her spears of light went flying off in a random direction, impaling the ground and trees.

Hey, I told you to stay out of this... But thanks for the save!

Gourry and I made eye contact for a second, tacitly agreeing to change course for the robed woman.

“Elemekia Lance!” I then let fly the spell I’d originally meant for the robed man, whose female counterpart was currently off balance from Ran’s attack. Elemekia Lance dealt spiritual damage, and it was perfectly capable of rendering a normal human opponent unconscious!

Robe No. 2 seemed to realize this, and... “Ngh!” She let out a curse and swept at the spell with her left hand! *Ka-zing!* The swipe broke up my spell with a loud ring!

What?! For the record, one does not simply bat away an Elemekia Lance! Just trying would knock most people out cold. But the woman seemed slightly shaken at worst. Maybe she had some kind of anti-spell magic item equipped to her arm, or maybe there was something else at play.

Gourry picked up speed at that point and closed the distance on her. “Hey, you!”

She took a fighting stance—and I promise you she was underestimating Gourry. The big lug pressed his charge, leaped in, and plunged the hilt of his sword into her solar plexus! When he did...

“What?!” It was Gourry who leaped back with a shout! I couldn’t see what had happened from where I was standing.

“Lina!” Gourry shouted. “They’re—”

Before he could finish the thought, I could hear thunderous footfalls rushing toward me from behind. I looked over my shoulder and... *What?!* From where the robed man stood, tearing through the forest toward me was... *A wolf?!*



Or *was* it a wolf? It looked like one, but it was the size of a horse! Where had the enormous beast come from?! Even among the trees, we should've seen it sooner! At any rate, I was clearly the one it was after. Its hate-filled eyes were locked on me.

"Lina?!" Gourry whipped around, but he wasn't going to make it in time. And comparing the size of the beast to my skill with a blade, there was no way I could hold it off on my own. In that case...

As the wolf closed in and bared its fangs, rather than run... I slid head-first between its front legs! I heard the sound of its jaws snapping shut above my head. Its four massive paws pounded against the ground as it charged right over me. As I scrambled back to my feet, Gourry ran over, his sword at the ready.

The giant wolf changed direction amidst the trees with great agility. It turned back toward me, and...

"Freeze Arrow!" Gauging my timing, I unleashed my spell! The wolf was too big to dodge it between the trees.

Instead, it howled—and instantly, a shield of pale red light appeared before the beast, shattering my arrows! *A defensive spell?! One of the robes had probably cast it... or more likely, it seemed like the wolf's howl had activated it.*

But just then...

"Wh-What is that?!" one of the knights shouted. Upon realizing the golem wasn't attacking, they'd apparently recovered enough to be startled all over again by the sight of the mammoth wolf.

"Where did it come from?!" another cried, asking exactly what I wanted to know.

"That magician! She must have summoned it with her magic!" yet another said, this one way off base.

Just then, the wolf seemed to... laugh? Without warning, it turned and dashed at the knights.

"It's coming!"

"Stay strong!"

“Fight back!”

The knights who were still in fighting shape—some on horseback and some on foot—hesitantly tried to form ranks. But before the two sides even made contact...

“Arwoooo!” The wolf howled again. Ten streaks of flaming arrows darted out at the knights. Their screams rose up in chorus. The wolf plunged right into the chaos, bit down on the arm of one knight through his armor, flung him off in a random direction, then charged at another.

“Regenell!” Hearing the robed man’s resounding voice, the wolf stopped in place. “Don’t play games!”

At this recrimination, the great beast called Regenell got some distance from the knights, turned back to me, and...

“You won’t get awaaay!” One of the knights lying nearby sat up with a roar and plunged his sword into the wolf’s side!

“Awoo?!” The wolf yowled as it leaped back. It didn’t look seriously wounded, but the hit did seem to inflict some pain. The beast turned an enraged gaze on the knight, and...

“Hraaagh!” A cyclops sent the knight flying with one sweep of its arm!

“What?!” the knights cried when they saw it.

Which was totally understandable. The giant wolf had transformed into a cyclops in an instant, after all. It was plain as day this was no ordinary wolf or cyclops. This Regenell creature was probably assuming various forms through magic.

While all that was going down, Gourry, Ran, and I were working together to defeat the robed woman. Or, at least, that probably would’ve been the smart call, but instead...

“Blast Ash!”

Whoom! The black something I conjured appeared near the cyclops. It should have devoured the creature with one hit... but the darn thing dodged my spell. It was as if he’d known where and when it would manifest. That wasn’t just a

coincidence. He'd readily evaded it!

"Why?" the commander groaned when he witnessed this. He was reeling in pain from the robed man's attack, but still stood up shakily and said, "Aren't you... allies?"

"These are the creeps who ambushed us that night in Lanoma. We assumed they were with you," I replied, my eyes still locked on the robed duo and the cyclops.

"Certainly not... But if they aren't with you, then you had no reason to interfere with us fighting each other..."

It was true that if the knights and the robed figures were both after us, we only benefited from them duking it out. But...

"It's obvious from the way they're acting. 'Hey, we can slaughter the knights and blame it on the girl.' And the idea of them getting away with that annoyed me, so I stepped in. That's all."

"You... think we'd lose?" The commander was playing tough, but it was clear he and his knights were already in a bad way. Only a few of them had full health at this point.

I decided to just let that one go and just gestured at the cyclops instead. "You're not exactly outfitted to fight something like that, are you?"

"Is your goal to have us in your debt?"

"Nah."

"This won't change our position toward you, Mistress Lina."

"I know, okay?" I responded so quickly that the commander fell silent.

"Yeah, and I don't really like sitting back and watching bad people get their way," Gourry said, standing by my side.

"Um, let's see. Does this mean..." Ran tapped her right shoulder with her staff, walked over to us, then turned to the robes. "It's okay for me to interfere with *them*, right?"

"Yep," I said with a thumbs-up.

“You were too obvious, Regenell,” the robed man said teasingly to the cyclops. “Your expression’s too easy to read, even as a wolf.”

“Oh, shut up.” The cyclops—or rather Regenell, currently in the form of a cyclops—muttered back at him.

Normally, I would’ve been surprised to see a talking cyclops, but I’d already seen him transform into one from a giant wolf. Talking was kinda small potatoes by comparison.

Apparently annoyed by the still-dancing golem, he walked up to it and smashed it with one arm. “What’s the big deal? It won’t change what we’re doing. Right, Galdorba?”

“Wrong. You have no business playing around until we’ve finished what we came here to do,” said the robed man—Galdorba.

“Tch. Stick in the mud,” Regenell spat.

“So?” I said, turning my eyes to the group. “Exactly who are you people? I hope this isn’t one of those ‘Whoops, made a mistake and got the wrong person, sorry,’ kinds of situations.”

I figured he’d ignore my snark, but...

“A mistake?” Galdorba responded. “No, there is no mistake. I received a prophecy.”

“A prophecy?” I scowled at this.

Where I came from, there were basically two kinds of “prophecies.” The first were legit glimpses of the future received by shrine maidens. These didn’t always reveal useful or relevant information, but they always came true. The second were more like flashes of insight. These were mostly instinct, and they frequently turned out to be inaccurate in practice.

So... which was this dude talking about?

“Yes! A prophecy!” Galdorba declared loudly and proudly. ““One in which chaos itself has dwelt shall appear from the land sealed by demons—and bring havoc!””

4: En Route to the Border, the Sights that Await Us...

Okay, a while back, I'd fought a high-ranking demon named Hellmaster Fibrizo. During said fight, I'd lost control of a spell, which resulted in me temporarily merging with chaos itself. And by "chaos itself," I of course mean the source of all existence, the golden Lord of Nightmares. In the end, it had returned whence it came and I'd returned to my senses, but...

Yeah, the prophecy Galdorba spoke of? Basically suited me to a T. The phrasing itself seemed highly subject to interpretation, but I couldn't really argue it didn't apply to me. It would've been easy enough to play dumb and say "dunno what you're talking about," but I doubted these robed guys would fall for that bit.

I'd put it together by now that Galdorba and his friends were a totally different faction from our Luzilte pursuers. I still didn't know who they were working for, mind you. But I *did* know they'd taken some so-called prophecy as gospel truth, and now they had a mind to kill me in the interest of peace, justice, and all that jazz.

They'd first attacked us in that city overnight—but they'd underestimated us and we'd lived to tell the tale. Then, after learning that the Kingdom of Luzilte was *also* after us, they'd apparently gotten the idea to use that against us. I guess they figured that all would be well if the knights ended up taking us out. But after following us for a while, they saw their Plan A going up in flames thanks to a single dancing golem. They must have lost patience and joined the fray then.

But even with all that in mind, they were being way too reckless!

"I've hit a nerve, have I?" Galdorba said after some silence. He'd seemed to be gauging my reaction.

"Nissy Lina? Raise havoc?" Ran asked, her eyes carefully fixed on our opponent.

I would have liked to deny that part, but... “Given that I’ve got both the knights of Luzilte and these mysterious robed guys after me... I’d say I’ve been there, done that, wouldn’t you?” From a certain point of view, I’d already fulfilled the prophecy. “Although, to be fair, I’d say you guys started it, and I’m just fighting back. If you’d leave me alone—or even help me get back home—we could resolve this all peacefully.”

“Laughable,” Galdorba scoffed in response to my proposal. “A prophecy cannot be denied. I suppose given the destruction you’ve already wrought, the prophecy *has* technically come true—but can we truly be certain that this is the end of it? Can you guarantee you’ll raise no further havoc? No. If we let you go now and the chaos spreads, it will be too late. In the interest of caution, it’s most logical to eliminate you now.”

“Personally, I feel like making mountains out of prophecy molehills is the real source of havoc here.”

“One way or another, the destruction will cease once you’re dead.”

“Enough, Galdorba,” Regenell spoke up, sounding like he’d lost his temper. Too bad. I’d really been hoping to stretch things out a little longer. “No amount of talking will change what we have to do here.”

“He has a point,” agreed their female companion. She walked over to Galdorba and removed her robe and mask, revealing herself to be a twentysomething woman with long black hair and symmetrical—*too* symmetrical—features that made her look more like a living doll than a human being. “The nonsense can wait until after we’ve fulfilled our purpose.”

“You dare call the prophecy nonsense?! What arrogance, Nelfic!” Galdorba blustered.

“I’m not calling the *prophecy* nonsense,” the woman, Nelfic, said as she turned toward me. “What’s nonsense is conversing with the person we’re here to kill!” Then, with a howl, she began barreling toward me!

“Right!” Regenell likewise began advancing.

Gourry and Ran stepped in front of me, and I whipped up an incantation lickety-split. I pointed a finger to heaven and whispered the words of power. A

ball of light appeared at my fingertip... then burst!

What I'd conjured was a Lighting spell. It was designed to provide illumination in the dark, but with a few quick alterations—that is, zeroing out its duration in exchange for maximum brightness—I had myself a handy-dandy blinding spell! Gourry and Ran were currently standing with their backs to me, but our approaching opponents were practically staring right at it when it went off.

"Geh!"

"Ack!"

Right on cue, Nelfic and Regenell both reeled back!

This trick worked best at night. It could *really* blind someone whose eyes had adjusted to the dark, but against the midday sun, it was more of a momentary dazzling. Good thing that was all we needed! The instant our opponents flinched, Gourry went after Regenell, and Ran after Nelfic!

The flash momentarily stopped Nelfic in her tracks, allowing Ran to run right up to her and thrust out her staff. *Womp!* It struck Nelfic square in the center of her chest!

"Guh!" Nelfic, who hadn't so much as yelped when Gourry hit her in the same spot with his hilt, now let out a cry and stumbled a few steps back. Perhaps Ran's was no ordinary strike. She might have used her wind magic to add a little extra oomph to the blow.

"You! What is that staff?!" the woman screamed. Judging from how shaken she seemed, that one must've really hurt.

"Nyee hee hee!" Ran grinned at the question and twirled her staff around as she replied, "It came from the heart of a tree that's feasted on magic a thousand and five hundred years, and it lives as part of that tree! It's known as..."

Huh, that reminded me of something. Our own world had once been host to a large tree that grew by feeding on miasma, and which had produced a sword from its heart. Swords and staffs were different, of course, but was Ran's weapon something functionally similar?

She raised the staff in her right hand high over her head and proclaimed for all to hear: “The Cool Stick!”

“That’s a terrible name!” Nelfic’s gut reaction was surprisingly in tune with my own.

At least give it a badass name or something!

“Don’t make fun of the Cool Stick!” Ran howled as she darted forward.

“I’m not mocking your weapon! It’s your taste I take issue with!” Nelfic cried—and I have to say I agreed with her on this one.

After that, Nelfic broke into a run as well. Ran thrust out with her staff again, but Nelfic dodged it this time. At least at first. Ran channeled her extended thrust into a follow-up sweep. And instead of Nelfic dodging, a set of black claws appeared from under her red robe to deflect the staff! Was it a clawed gauntlet of some kind? That must have been what had repelled Gourry earlier.

Before it could get tangled up in the claws, Ran withdrew the staff (I really don’t want to call it a stick; it was a proper staff, if a roughly hewn one), then struck, swiped, and thrust in rapid succession. She was probably using the wind that wreathed her to enhance her speed and power, but it was astonishing to see her move like that while using a spell capable of wrecking you with one wrong move. Nelfic managed to avoid the attacks somehow or other, but she was steadily being pushed back until...

“Graaah!” Nelfic howled, and at her summons, a ball of light appeared behind Ran!

Attacking from her blind spot?! Or is she ignoring Ran to target me now?!

Before I could discern the answer... *Crash!* Almost as if she could see behind her, Ran unceremoniously lashed out with her staff and smashed through the ball of light!

Nelfic ignored this and took a step forward. Her claws met Ran’s staff with a clang... and then her long black hair hardened, transforming into giant claws that streaked at Ran from both sides!

There’s no way she can dodge that! Or so it seemed for a second. But...

Whump! Ran didn't even bother trying. She simply stepped in toward Nelfic with a blow at her head, forcing Nelfic to bend backward.

Regenell, transformed into a cyclops, was tall enough to peek into the second-story windows of a house. The height differential between him and Gourry was like that of an adult and a toddler. To Regenell, it probably only looked like something began flying toward him in his moment of blindness. He defensively flung his arm out, but...

"Dodge, Regenell!" Galdorba shouted.

Regenell seemed to pick up on the urgency in Galdorba's tone, because...

"What?!" he shouted—and then leaped upward with power unimaginable for a cyclops. At the apex of his jump, he morphed into a great four-winged bird, transforming leap into flight! I'd never seen a creature like it. Perhaps it was something indigenous to the outer lands. It wielded its four wings in impressive formation to remain hovering in place in the air.

"Wh-What was that?" Regenell asked. He'd done as he was told without hesitation, but he didn't seem to understand the reason for the warning.

I was pretty sure I did, though—underestimating Gourry and swinging wildly was a good way to get yourself cut in half. Galdorba had only tangled with Gourry briefly before, but that was apparently enough to teach him that the big lug wasn't to be taken lightly.

Tch! Spoilsport!

Nevertheless, I chanted and released my next spell! "Fireball!"

The bead of light I conjured made a beeline for the airborne Regenell. It would burst into flames on contact, but...

"You'll never hit me!" Regenell, apparently now fully recovered from the blinding I'd inflicted, let out a snort and dodged the Fireball with ease.

Too bad for him I'd expected that. See, I figured he might transform and retreat while airborne, so I'd made sure this was no ordinary Fireball. I'd cooked up one of my signature variations. The minute the bead of light left Regenell's

field of vision, I had the spell change course.

“Behind you!” Galdorba called in warning. Too bad for him I’d anticipated that too.

“Break!” I snapped my fingers.

Cra-bwoosh! The light burst near Regenell as he moved to dodge, scattering fire all around him. See, my handiwork on the spell didn’t just let me control its movement; I could also trigger it on cue!

“Agh!” Regenell cried out—not in a chant but in pain. Turning himself into a bird hadn’t been the wisest choice. As the flames spread along his very flammable feathers, he plummeted to the earth. “Graaah!” Right before impact, he took the form of a giant spider, which just barely allowed him to regain his equilibrium and touch down lightly.

Gourry wasn’t about to give him a chance to recover. But before the big lug could strike... countless flaming spears appeared in the sky!

What the... How are there that many of them?!

“Celestial Flare...” Galdorba’s voice echoed over the battlefield, “Descend.”

Heeding his call, pillars of fire began to rain down. Did the spell target everyone *but* him?! Was he going to take his allies out right along with us?!

Per Galdorba’s command—*Cracrash!*—the flames descended. Heat filled the surrounding air as leaves, branches, grass, and earth all burned. Gourry aborted his charge to focus on dodging. Ran and Nelfic kept up their fight, but thankfully neither of them were hit.

As for Regenell... “Graaah!” With a cry, he now transformed into a giant beetle! The flames struck his back, but they didn’t do much to harm his hulking carapace. The individual blasts of fire weren’t terribly hot, although the rain of flame scorched the air, singeing our skin and making it difficult to breathe.

With Regenell literally under fire, was this my chance? I kept dodging, enduring the pain in my lungs as I began to chant!

Thou who art darker than twilight

Thou who art redder than lifeblood...

“The Dark Lord’s spell?!” Galdorba gasped.

I had no idea how he’d heard me from that distance—but yep! I was currently calling on the power of Dark Lord Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu, which was capable of blowing up even a dragon! The spell hit everything within a certain range indiscriminately, but as long as I used it the right way, it was A-okay. My target at the moment was Regenell’s beetle form!

...Shall face destruction unconstrained

Grant me power, and unleash thine!

I clapped my hands together and, catching my signal, Gourry leaped back and out of the fray.

“Dragon Slave!”

In response to my words of power, red light coalesced around Regenell... Then a circle of white light appeared atop it! The red light was my spell, but what in the world was that white circle?!

Cra-booooosh! The ensuing explosion shook the very air and all of the surrounding trees. This bad boy could blast away a small castle. Even in the inner lands, a kingdom with a single sorcerer who knew how to cast it was not to be trifled with.

Now, I’d been hesitant to whip it out in the outer lands thus far, but things had gotten serious enough that I couldn’t afford to be conservative. My thought was that the explosion centered on Regenell should take out Galdorba behind him too, but...

“Grr... rrrr...” Mixed in with the reverberations after the explosion came a low... low growl. “Graaah!”

Finally appearing out of the thin smoke was the writhing, howling Regenell.

He endured it?! Or... did he block it?!

“Regenell? Galdorba?!” Nelfic shouted after getting some distance from Ran.

“I suppose it’s only natural... that I can’t fully block the Dark Lord’s spell...” Galdorba groaned. He was obviously in pain, but I couldn’t yet see him through the smoke. “We’ll have to... retreat for now...”

“Yeah, not much choice...” Regenell replied.

“Got it!” Nelfic followed suit, disappearing into the swirling cloud.

I didn’t want to let them get away! I was about to chant another spell, but... All of a sudden, Regenell’s shadowy form, previously visible within the smoke, disappeared. Then—*Whoosh!*—kicking up a powerful wind and cutting through the cloud came a spreading pair of giant wings!

Wait, that’s—

With each wingbeat stirring up more wind, the great creature took to the sky!

“A dragon?!” the knight commander exclaimed in shock.

He was right... It was a pitch-black dragon! I’d seen my share of dragons, and this one was definitely on the larger side. Two of the red-robed figures grabbed its legs, and before I could chant a spell...

“Graaaaaaah!” It let out a howl and took off, flying toward the horizon with unthinkable speed. That roar had probably been a spell chant, using magic to increase its velocity.

Ah, they got away after all... Our battle with the robed figures was over—for now.

I turned back to face the knight commander and said, “Might as well ask... Any idea what those guys in robes might be?”

He was silent in response. Did he really not know? Or did he just not want to tell us?

“Understood. We’ll be going, then,” I followed up, turning to leave as the knights behind us just stood and watched.

This probably goes without saying, but the world’s a big place. You might not get a chance to appreciate just how big if you put down roots in one spot, but if you ever go traveling, you get a sense of it.

Sometimes walking, sometimes taking a wagon, the three of us kept heading north.

By the time we arrived in the city of Toltas, it had been about ten days since our fight with the knights and the robed guys in the village of Renihorn. We hadn't seen any signs of ambush from the robed figures, nor any signs of pursuit by the knights since. I felt pretty optimistic about saying we'd shaken the knights, but that was too much to hope for from the robes.

As we walked one of Toltas's roads, I gazed up at the blue sky, lost in thought.

"Lina?" called Gourry, who was on my right.

"Hmm?"

"What are you thinking about?"

Guess the guy saw right through me. "Say, Gourry." I gave him a small smile. "If... If we ever get back home safe..."

"Yeah?"

"I was thinking about how we could best spite Norst."

"That's what you were staring into the distance about?!"

Well, duh! I had no idea to what degree Norst had planned this, but he'd really put us through the wringer here... My rage wouldn't be sated until I gave him what for!

"I'd love to say 'blast his ass,' but, y'know... Didn't he say he'd lay off humanity for a while so long as we looked the other way the next time we crossed paths? I'm worried that if I come calling, he'd say, 'Lina Inverse broke our deal, so now I guess I can do whatever I like to humans.' So I think we'd better keep our end of the bargain. How about, if we happen to pass each other on the road, I just whisper in his ear, 'I haven't forgotten.'"

"Scary!" Gourry responded.

I nodded thoughtfully in response. "So you think that'd do the trick?"

"Norst?" Ran asked from my left.

"Ah, the guy who brought me and Gourry here."

"And you want revenge?"

"Hmm... less revenge and more some playful menace," I said, scratching my

head. Just then...

There was suddenly nervous murmuring behind us. We all stopped and turned around. The crowd was splitting in two, as if avoiding something.

At the center of the commotion was a man with silver hair. His gaze was shrewd. His clothing was loose-fitting. He wore a scarf over his nose and ears, even though it wasn't particularly cold out today. He unceremoniously raised his right hand, then pulled down his scarf...

I could hear screams from the passersby around us, for where the man's mouth should be was a huge, twisted maw.

"I've never been good at mimicking humans," he hissed.

That voice... The silver-haired man sucked in a breath. *Not good!*

"Run!" I shouted and ran for a side road. Gourry and Ran were right behind me. Everyone else on the street began fleeing too, realizing what was about to happen.

Crackapoppop! The thunder breath that shot from his mouth coursed through the city street. Several bystanders, hit by the lightning, collapsed helplessly. Flagstones sparked, fruit stands exploded, and wooden walls burned. It was by pure luck that the three of us were able to avoid a direct hit by leaping behind a building with an iron door. If it hadn't absorbed the lightning, it likely would've mowed us down.

But we didn't stick around after that. We kept running.

"Did he just breathe something?!" Gourry screamed.

"Oh, just dragon breath!" I shouted back. I'd had an inkling already, and that last move just proved it. The people in red robes weren't humans—they were dragons.

Their unthinkable casting speed. Their ability to mix flight and other spells. That alone proved they weren't human. And last time, when they'd retreated... Regenell hadn't taken the guise of a dragon; he'd reverted to his true form. Their powers to fly and use breath attacks were also natural inborn abilities rather than spells. They'd been wary of my Dragon Slave, too, which had to be

why they'd appeared in the city where I couldn't use it. On top of that, they'd proven they didn't care much about harming human bystanders.

There was panic on the main drag, and I could hear the screams and shouts of people rushing back and forth around us. I assumed our current attacker was Galdorba based on his voice. But I also assumed his pals were around too.

"Um, um... Are you saying that that was a dragon, not a person?!" Ran asked.

"I think so! We've got to get them away from the city!" In a densely populated area, I couldn't use any particularly flashy spells, let alone a Dragon Slave. Of course, I couldn't be sure our robed friends were going to allow us a change of venue.

I passed through an alley onto a backstreet. The panic on the main thoroughfare had reached this far, and there were people running all around in confusion. Amidst the chaos, I could feel someone watching me. I turned around and saw a woman with black hair wearing loose-fitting clothing.

Nelfic?!

The moment our eyes met, she charged me! Her white hands swelled and blackened, becoming terrifying talons. Each time she raked her hands through the air, they spat out multiple black projectiles that came flying straight at us. Gourry swiftly drew his sword and Ran swung her staff to scatter them. Meanwhile, the projectiles that hit the townspeople brought more screams and terror to the streets.

I caught a glimpse of a few projectiles as they hit the ground. They were small, black, and metallic. *Scales?!*

I began chanting a spell to repel Nelfic's charge. Ran and Gourry also readied themselves, and just then, a shadow grew from Nelfic's left shoulder. No, not a shadow! It was a giant black wing! When the wing touched a nearby house, it effortlessly smashed through the wall and brought down the roof, casting rubble every which way. Naturally, that included in our direction.

Ugh! What an annoying method of attack!

"Break through!" Ran shouted in a strange voice, running forward instead of dodging the debris.

Okay! Got it! Heeding her plan, I began charging forward as well. Gourry did the same. Ran swung her staff to knock away the falling rubble, though obviously her staff wasn't doing all of the work. Anything she couldn't personally bat away was blown off course by the wind that wreathed her.

It appeared Nelfic hadn't expected us to come after her, because her false face showed its first sign of true shock now.

Then I released the spell I'd chanted! "Howl Freeze!" This baby unleashed a powerful blizzard, and icy gales weren't exactly easy to dodge. It wasn't fatal by any means, but cold like that would easily slow you down.

"Gweh!" Nelfic howled as she took the hit. Had she been in dragon form, it would've felt like nothing more than a cool breeze. But it was pretty effective against her at human size!

As she recoiled, Gourry ran up and—

"Tch!" Nelfic leaped up and out of sword range with the help of the great wing she'd sprouted to cave in the building earlier.

Darn it! She'd done the same thing earlier. She was really on her guard against Gourry. Once she was airborne, Nelfic unfurled a second wing. The first shrank down to match its size, and both began flapping to keep her in the air. She then sucked in air...

Dragon breath from above?! Not good!

Just then... "This way!" someone called.

I looked toward the voice and saw a face peeking out of the door of a nearby building. *Captain Morgan from Palbathos?! What was he doing here?* No, I didn't have time to wonder about that! The three of us quickly leaped inside, the door shut behind us, and...

Roarrrr! Then came the howling of a tornado.

We ran through the house—rather, what appeared to be a restaurant. Fire gave chase, burning through the fissure in the wall sliced open by Nelfic's wing and through the windows. The four of us, including Captain Morgan, fled out of the opposite door onto the main avenue. And then the flame...

Roarrrr! It erupted through the door, windows, and alleys! It was a close call, but we'd all made it through safely.

Except Galdorba's out on the main avenue, isn't he?! I swiftly looked around, and in the middle of all the panic on the street, I saw a child crying. Perhaps from the tear of lightning from before, there was destruction and smoke rising all around. People were crying, screaming, wailing...

But there was no sign of Galdorba now. He must've moved in pursuit of us.

The crowd was still running around in confused chaos. Old people were crouched on the side of the road. A girl of about seven or eight crying across the street locked eyes with me. "Help me, miss!" she pleaded as she looked over, her arms stretched wide. And I...

"Gimme a breeeeeak!" *Wham!* I promptly spun around and unleashed a kick to her face with all the force I could muster.

"Gbweh?!" The girl let out a strange cry as she smashed into a nearby wall!

"What?!" Morgan shouted, aghast, but I didn't take my eyes off the girl.

The girl immediately sat up and howled, "You! What are you doing?!"

I glared at her coldly in response. "You're a bad actor, Regenell!"

Yup, that was the name of the game. The girl in front of me was no innocent victim amidst all the turmoil. It was Regenell, who'd taken the form of a human child in hopes of pulling the wool over my eyes. If he'd been a better actor, he might have gotten away with it too. But his disguise notwithstanding, he'd ignored closer adults to run straight toward me—not to mention he was brimming with hostility. I'd been deceived by a high-ranking demon in child form before, so he was gonna have to get up *way* earlier in the morning than that to fool me.

"Damn youuu!" Regenell howled as he transformed into a green dragon about the size of a horse. And then... "Huh?"

"Regenell," I said, gazing at him. "You really should've listened to your friends, dude. Too bad it's too late now."

With a clink, Gourry—who was standing right next to Regenell—sheathed his

sword.

As he realized what had happened and tried to struggle, all too late, Regenell's body tilted to the side and collapsed to the ground.

The moment he'd perceived that an enemy was upon us, Gourry had adroitly moved to slice through the dragon mid-transformation. Maybe if, instead of cursing, Regenell had retreated straight for the sky like when he'd transformed from cyclops to giant bird on Galdorba's advice, he could have dodged it, but...

There was no light left in the fallen dragon's eyes.

Only Nelfic and Galdorba remained. That said, we couldn't afford to hang around all day. I began walking in the opposite direction from where we'd left Nelfic earlier. My companions followed suit. Gourry, Ran, and Captain Morgan —

"Wait, Captain Morgan, what *are* you doing here?!"

"What do you think?" he replied. "I was ordered by my kingdom to track you down, Mistress Lina."

Aha... Stopping to think about it, that did make sense. Captain Morgan had met us personally, after all.

Ignoring the fact that I'd stopped in my tracks, he said, "And when I finally caught up to you... this was the situation. It didn't exactly seem appropriate to apprehend you. I've received reports of the damage they've caused to the Knights of the Silver Spear, but to think this is the Neosfeed in the flesh..."

I quickly resumed walking. "Neosfeed?"

"A group that worships Flare Dragon Ceifeed. We've only ever heard about them in rumors ourselves. They're distinct from the church of Ceifeed you find in cities here and there. It's fine enough that they venerate Ceifeed and advocate for defeating demons, but..." We cut down a side road onto a different street. Things were pretty chaotic here too, but there was no obvious damage to the area. "Their group consists of only nonhuman species like dragons and elves."

“Dragons and elves?!” I found myself shouting. I was surprised but, reasonably speaking, it only made sense that elves and dragons worshiped the same god we did.

Captain Morgan nodded. “They call themselves ‘Neosfeed,’ the religion of the true Flare Dragon Ceifeed. Since we humans aren’t really strong enough to oppose demons, and we produce large amounts of negative emotions, they scorn us as mere demon fodder. So they refuse to let us join them and consider us disposable in the pursuit of their goals, or so I hear.”

“Huh?!”

“It’s said that long ago, when a greater demon appeared in Maricida, they came to slay it, but they happily burned the city and its army in the process.”

“What?!”

That explained why Regenell had seemed to take such glee in attacking the knights during our fight near Renihorn Village. And they were concerned about a prophecy that I was dangerous? That was... seriously messed up, if I’m being honest.

But if Captain Morgan was aware of these Neosfeed guys, surely the knight commander had been as well. Granted, he’d been under no obligation to share intel with wanted fugitives...

“So, how many of them are there in total?” I asked.

“I don’t know. As I said, we’ve only heard rumors.”

“And those guys just have free rein out here?”

“It’s not as if they’re actively trying to kill humans. They just don’t care about collateral damage. And we don’t know where their home base is, how many of them there are, or—”

“Raaaaaaaagh!” A howl from the main avenue interrupted the captain. Was something happening there?

“What now?” he asked.

“We’ll just have to handle it,” I replied instantly.

Naturally, Toltas had its own garrison or something like it. When we returned to the main avenue, the city guard was engaged with Galdorba and Nelfic.

That said, it wasn't really much of a battle... The garrison shot volleys of arrows from a distance, and Nelfic fried them with her fire breath, leaving nothing more than burned-up sticks to fall to the ground. She spread her black wings and crushed houses, and when the flying rubble made the guards flinch, she closed in on them with her claws or her hair turned to blades. Some managed to block these attacks with their armor and fight back with their swords, but no slash could penetrate her torso before she retaliated with her claws and hair.

Though she appeared human right now, she was a dragon. Even her bare skin was likely as tough as scale hide. Piercing it with any average skill or weapon would be nigh impossible. The black claws, the freely moving black hair, and the dragon wings folded on her back made Nelfic look like a true she-devil.

Meanwhile, Galdorba was throwing out spells here and there to mow through the surrounding garrison. When he'd first removed his hood and mask, he'd had the semblance of a silver-haired man with a torn-open mouth, but it seemed he no longer felt compelled to keep up the act. He'd taken on a sort of weredragon form, with a bestial face covered in silver scales and two horns protruding backward from it.

I suspected the reason they weren't reverting to their full dragon forms was because they were wary of my Dragon Slave. Obviously I wasn't gonna throw that around in town, but if I could do it *above* town—for instance, if a massive enemy took to the skies—I would consider it a viable option. And they were clearly intent on denying me that opportunity.

Even if the garrison couldn't defeat Nelfic or Galdorba, as long as they could just lure one of them away, that would make things easier. Sadly, however, based on what I could see, most of the guards were already dead or in hiding. No one was fighting back—so I ran out with a chant on my lips! I was aiming for the closer of the two dragons, Nelfic!

"She's here!" she cried when she saw me, her voice teeming with hatred. Hearing this, Galdorba looked over.

Gourry, Ran, and I dashed across the ruined flagstones toward Nelfic. She showed a moment's hesitation, then began chanting something.

Ignoring her, I finished my spell! "Dynast Breath!"



At almost the same time... “Graaaaah!” Nelfic and Galdorba both howled!

I’d used a spell that would encase a target in magical ice, then shatter that ice. It easily had enough power to break a brass demon-level opponent. Granted, the last time I’d used it was to take care of a weird fish!

Krik! Nelfic’s body audibly froze over. When it did... two layers of white circle surrounded her!

That light again!

My magical ice burst into thousands of frosty flakes. The trapped opponent shattered along with it... or that was the idea. However, after the ice dispersed in pieces, Nelfic remained standing there, completely unharmed!

Aha... The circles were a defensive spell that Nelfic and Galdorba had cast simultaneously, probably the same one that had mitigated my last Dragon Slave. The reason Nelfic had hesitated for a moment when she’d realized I was casting a spell just now was probably because she was unsure if she should press her attack or pause to defend.

“Damn you all!” she howled. “You killed Regenell!”

“If you aren’t prepared for the consequences, don’t go picking fights!” I clapped back.

Nelfic readied herself to meet the charging Gourry and Ran. And then... a tremble ran through her body.

“Nelfic?!” Galdorba cried from nearby.

Unable to comprehend what had just happened, Nelfic, pinned to the ground, let out a small and bloody cough.

“Such acrobatics are best left to the young people, in my opinion...” Captain Morgan said, removing the Blast Sword he’d used to impale Nelfic.

The whole thing was pretty simple once you knew the trick. We’d used the fact that the dragons were on guard for Gourry against them. Gourry had traded swords with Captain Morgan, and while we kept the dragons distracted, Captain Morgan had climbed to the roof of the nearby house and leaped down to deal the fatal blow. I’d originally thought he might say no, but perhaps

realizing there was no other choice under the circumstances, he'd agreed to the plan. Normal swords and normal skills couldn't pierce Nelfic's hide, but the Blast Sword, whose sharpness increased in proportion to the magic around it, certainly could!

Time to keep up this momentum and finish off Galdorba!

I began my next chant! Captain Morgan swapped swords back with Gourry as the enemy moved toward him.

"Foolish humaaan!" Galdorba took in a deep breath, and —*Crackapoppoppoppop!*—he unleashed his lightning breath.

Perhaps expecting this, Captain Morgan unceremoniously threw his sword, drawing the lightning to it.

Gourry closed in from the left, Ran from the right. But Galdorba didn't back down. Why? Because I came charging in from the front a second later! I was the one he wanted, so if I charged in as bait, he'd have to consider whether he wanted to retreat or take his chances.

Galdorba roared, summoning up a tornado.

"Geh!" The powerful wind became a wall that kept Gourry at bay.

Ran, however, pressed her charge! The wind around her was canceling out Galdorba's tornado—and she rode its flow to close the distance!

Crackle! Light flashed in Galdorba's open mouth!

Thunder breath?! He was aiming at me! Maybe it wasn't as powerful when he conjured it so quickly, but it was still lightning, and I was still flesh and blood.

That moment felt like an eternity. I could see the ball of lightning in Galdorba's maw grow and grow and...

"Hup!" Ran said casually, and suddenly, raining into my vision were countless small... arrowheads?!

The metal projectiles sailed through the air, sucked in by the electricity, straight for Galdorba! At some point, Ran had collected the fallen arrowheads from the ground, and she'd now tossed them.

Whether the electricity was hurting him as well, or if he was just shocked by the gesture, Galdorba stopped in place for a moment... And that's when I dove in! He sliced at me with his claws to intercept my charge, but I'd already finished casting my spell. I pressed both my palms to his chest, and just as his claws struck out at me...

"Blast Wave!"

Crash! A blow that could even pierce a castle wall pulverized the silver weredragon.

"Well done, all," Captain Morgan said with the manner of our superior officer as he walked over to the scene.

"You weren't bad yourself," I replied. "I mean, we weren't counting on you *that* much, but you did a good job. I was worried you'd get too scared to jump down when it mattered."

"I certainly was scared. I haven't jumped down from a roof since I was a child," he replied with an easy smile.

It occurred to me, perhaps too late to matter... was this dude better than I'd given him credit for? Thinking back, during the whole "Dark Lord of the North" hunt, I had thought it odd that the kingdom sent some guy from the local guard. But if he was one of the most skilled fighters in the country, that would explain it. It also explained why his request to bring two wanderers like us in on the fight had been so readily granted.

Still, if my hunch was right... I should've put him to better use and spared myself the risky headlong charge straight into danger.

Whether he'd guessed what I was thinking or not, he turned a playful gaze my way. "I'm surprised that you trusted me that much, though. I could've just run off with that magical sword of yours. Or taken the chance to strike you unawares, carrying out my orders and getting on the good side of Neosfeed at the same time."

"You wouldn't," I said, waving my hand dismissively. "I mean, you saved us before, right?" If he'd wanted us dead, he could've just kept the door locked when Nelfic was breathing fire at us.

“True,” he said, looking over the wrecked cityscape. “On an emotional level, I couldn’t simply let these hooligans remain at large...”

Wpsh! Suddenly, I heard the sound of beating wings. We looked around in confusion and saw Nelfic gone from where she’d been lying. Using her draconic magic to accelerate, she flew away unsteadily.

“She survived?!” I had to admit, girl had good instincts. If she’d tried to take a potshot at us, I would’ve picked up on her hostile intent and realized she was still alive.

“So their vital areas are different from those of a human...” Morgan whispered, watching the flapping pair of wings disappear into the distance. Given her speed, there was no way we’d catch up.

So she got away... I felt like this could spell trouble for us in the future.

“Well then,” Captain Morgan said, turning his gaze to the far north. “Head that way for five days more and you’ll reach the border. Beyond is the Duchy of Belheid, though I’m afraid I still haven’t heard anything about a country that borders a desert. I’ll return to the capital, say I was attacked by a group believed to be Neosfeed in Toltas, and that you and your companions were killed in the conflict.”

I appreciated the help, of course, but... “Why?”

“Ah, I’m just lazy. Oh, right... I also owe you for your help in beating the Dark Lord of the North.”

“Roger that. Well...” I almost said “see you,” but I had to stop myself. We were unlikely to ever meet again, after all. “Take care.”

And so the three of us and Captain Morgan went our separate ways. It goes without saying that the world is a big place. It’s big... but maybe it also goes without saying that it isn’t infinite.

“Mmm...” We stood in the cool shade of a tree on a tall hill. Ran stretched. “The weather’s nice.”

It was a leisurely afternoon. I sat down in the grass next to her and lazily

replied, “It sure is.”

We were overlooking a line of fencing along green hills that almost looked like it belonged to a farm.

“We finally made it,” Gourry, sitting beside me, said in a meaningful voice, gazing in the same direction.

“We sure did,” I whispered as well. This half-hearted fence was actually the border between the Kingdom of Luzilte and the Duchy of Belheid.

Now... despite how calmly we were talking, I was planning on using my Levitation spell to get us over said border come nightfall! We weren’t up on this hill for a picnic, but rather to scout out border security. We saw the occasional soldiers from both countries patrolling their respective sides of the fence, but they were pretty few and far between. Thanks to that, we were feeling pretty chill about the whole operation.

Besides, it was important to take time to relax like this. When I really stopped to think about it, our future was extremely uncertain. Just because we crossed the border didn’t necessarily mean those Neosfeed guys would give up on us. I doubted human territoriality meant anything to them.

It’d be one thing if their “organization” turned out to be five dudes... but I wasn’t banking on that. And once Nelfic told the rest of the group about our abilities and how we’d killed two of their friends, they were likely to come better prepared next time. I’d also lost my magic-amplifying talismans before this far-flung journey, so my spell repertoire was smaller than before.

Now, if I could master spells that borrowed the power of the Dragon Lords, usable here in the outer lands, that’d be a different story. But there was no telling if that would be as easy as substituting a few lines from one chant with another. There was a lot that went into spellcasting, from understanding the incantation itself to control of one’s own magic flow to individual affinities. Ran had taught me the words of the wind spell she’d used, but I hadn’t gotten it to activate once in all my tries so far. There was a lot more for me to study and play around with.

Of course, I *wanted* to learn, partly to satisfy my curiosity and partly to help combat the Neosfeed guys—a two-birds-with-one-stone kind of situation.

“So, Ran, what will you do after we cross the border?” I asked as the question occurred to me.

“Do about what?”

“Well, you know. If you stick with us, you’ll keep getting caught up in various fine messes.”

“True...” Only moving her eyes, Ran watched a butterfly flitting around nearby. “If I don’t like it, I’ll say goodbye. But I’ll stick with you until then.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure. If I’m not being a third wheel with you two.”

“Huh?!” Where had that come from? Gourry was spaced out and didn’t seem to have heard it, but... “That aside, Ran, I’ve been meaning to ask you something.” I quickly changed the subject. “About that staff of yours...”

“The Cool Stick?”

“Yeah, that. You think you could give it a better name?”

“Huh? The Cool Stick is a great name. It just makes you think... ‘Wow, cool!’ Right?”

“Sure... Still, I mean, nothing against the taste of your kinsmen, but wouldn’t you want, you know, a more dignified name for it?”

“Hmm...” She thought a while longer. “Oh! The tree it came from has a distinguished name! We could call it that!”

“A distinguished name?”

“Yah! There’s an old legend back where I came from about the heroes Democain and Lamocael, who lived a super-duper long time. The tree’s also been alive for ages, so we named it after them, to basically mean ‘the really long-lived tree!’” She grinned.

“Oh? That sounds promising. So what’s the name?”

“The Mocamoca tree!”

“Why?!” I found myself shouting.

“Well, from De-moca-in and La-moca-el...”

“Why did you choose *those* parts?!”

If it really was a relative of the sacred tree Flagoon from the inner realm... and its real name really was the Mocamoca Tree... that was kind of disappointing in a lot of ways.

“Okay! We’ll use the tree’s name and call it the Mocamoca Stick! How’s that, Nissy Lina?” Ran nodded enthusiastically, seeming extremely excited about the idea.

“Wait, Ran, calm down. Can you think it over a little more?” I tried to stop her before she got too set on the idea, but...

“Why? It’s the Mocamoca Stick! Where I come from, everyone would think that’s super cool! Rostir Gou thinks it sounds cool too, I bet!”

Why would you put the question to someone who wasn’t even listening? At least, I thought he wasn’t, but Gourry, who perhaps had just so happened to tune in for a bit, smiled uncomfortably and said, “It’s not bad, but I’d have named it the Elder Rod or the Ancient Staff or something myself.”

Wow, those were actually cool! Or maybe anything sounded better than... Mocamoca Stick.

Ran puffed out her chest and grinned. “See? Rostir Gou thinks it’s okay too!”

“I just want to know why you chose those parts of the names!” I shouted.

We still didn’t have any clues about how to get home, and we had a long journey ahead of us.

But... I had a feeling the longer journey was going to be getting me and Ran to agree on what was cool.

Afterword

Scene: The Author (Hajime Kanzaka) and L

L: It's out... Part three, which you swore would never happen, is out.

Au: There are no absolutes in this world, and space is full of infinite possibilities.

L: Oh, shut up! Don't get puffed up just because the last volume sold pretty well!

Au: Sorry for getting puffed up. But anyway, this was *Slayers* vol. 17: "The Long Road Home"!

L: Well, all I care about is that I'm back for the afterwords! Still... I figured you'd spend the rest of your life making excuses and lazing about.

Au: Who do you think I am?! Or so I'd like to retort, but I actually thought that would be the case myself.

L: Then why the change of heart?

Au: Some things in my life calmed down, and I got absorbed in books, games, all kinds of new releases... And with all that input recharging me, I found I had the will to create something new.

L: Like Gu*pla?

Au: Partly build kits like Gu*pla, yes, but now that I'm being assaulted by humanity's mortal enemy, farsightedness, that's become harder. Call it the desire to write something again. That sort of thing. I had vague ideas for a non-*Slayers* story, but while I was thinking it over, it felt more like someone else's idea and that I should put out a more interesting story, so I gave up on it.

L: So you finally came back here.

Au: Basically. I felt like I had to do something for the fans who have been supporting the *Slayers* universe all this time.

L: A better gesture would've been to write something not as terrible.

Au: Eck! Don't say that!

L: Ah. He coughed up blood.

Au: I'm okay! Two hundred milliliters doesn't count!

L: That's actually quite a lot!

Au: It's less than in a battle manga! Not that I'm in a battle manga!

L: But there are versions of part three in places other than the novels, right? *TRY* in the anime and *Knight of Aqualord* in the manga. Where does this part three stand? Is the novel version the canon version?

Au: Hmm... I don't really like talking about "canon" or rejecting the other versions. Let's just say it's a parallel part three.

L: Well, if that's what it feels like... You really think you'll write this one to the end? The content so far makes it seem like it'll go on for a while.

Au: Erk! Well... The length of the journey is one thing, but there are also issues with how long their journey is. *Slayers* isn't too clear about its measurements for a reason. I'll be writing and get an idea and look it up, but when you're writing a travel story, really considering the distances is one of the biggest hurdles, I've thought.

L: So you really have thought about it, Mr. Author?

Au: Of course I have! I've thought about a lot of things and come up with logic and settings! And after doing that, I cut it all out to keep from boring people with explanations! That stuff is typical!

L: It is not!

Au: Is too! For this story, too, I originally had ideas about getting passes and how they're used, and all this explanation about them... but it didn't make the story more interesting at all! There's not going to be any point in the story where Lina's using her spell to fly and says, "There's a checkpoint but I don't have a pass! What will I do?!"

L: Ah... Fair point.

Au: The whole flight thing is basically cheating.

L: You're saying that *now*? After you wrote it in?! It's true that flight spells do feel like they could get around a lot of society's security devices.

Au: But because of all that, it meant the scenes where she actually uses her pass would have no payoff, so I just got rid of them.

L: So there are no passes in the world?

Au: It's more like they exist, but Lina doesn't talk about using them. That aside, when I think about the distances traveled and stuff, it's pretty challenging. I was looking things over online, and the people from the past would do the 53 stations of the Tokaido, about 500 kilometers, in fifteen days or less. So, based on that, when I think about how long it would take to move around the world... the answer I arrive at is that I'm really grateful to have planes, trains, and cars.

L: *That's* your conclusion?!

Au: Of course it is! Five hundred kilometers over fifteen days is about 33 kilometers per day. Considering the average walking speed is 4 kilometers per hour, that's eight hours of walking per day! I don't even like walking for five minutes!

L: Maybe... you should put more effort in? You know?

Au: But my own personal weaknesses aside, people back then worked way too hard! They should stop at a café when they get tired like we do nowadays in the city. Not that they had those, of course. When you're tired, it's nice to have a place nearby to rest, but those aren't always around. That can lead to collapse from exhaustion! And yet people walked.

L: Well, some might say they had no choice. Maybe riding horseback? But only certain people had access to that.

Au: All the more reason to appreciate our modern lives! Travel infrastructure is great, but other stuff, like air conditioning, is truly godly! Incidentally, I'm writing this afterword in the summer.

L: Well, it's fine to be grateful for modern civilization, but what will you do

about the number of days it takes Lina & Co. to travel?

Au: I've made the decision not to think about it.

L: You just gave up?!

Au: The roads aren't always straight, and they're not walking all the time, and even if I design it really precisely, it's like what I said about passes earlier... It doesn't create a lot in the way of narrative opportunity, so there's not much point to it.

L: So the travel distances aside, what about your writing speed regarding the length of the story?

Au: Well, er...

L: We're talking about various ideas that haven't appeared in this volume—how many volumes long would it be if you put them all in the story? You'll have to write at a pace of a volume a month!

Au: Well, by that same token, if I lived to be 170 years old, I could write one volume every ten years and still finish!

L: Are you a Galapagos tortoise now?! How long do you think you'll stay at this? That's right. In order to make you work hard, until you put out the next volume, you only get to use your AC in winter and your heater in the summer!

Au: Hng! Actually, I groaned instinctively, but lately the temperature has been higher than what you can set the heater to in summer. It's also colder outside in winter than what you can set the AC to.

L: You're right! Ah... Then just no heating or cooling at all.

Au: Sorry. I'll do my best. Please spare me.

L: Yes, do your best! And now that I've forced the author to get his butt in gear, everyone, see you next volume!

Afterword: Over.

Bonus Translator/Editor Chat!

[Meg/ED]

Welcome to the rather unexpected beginning of part 3!

[Liz/TL]

We certainly started translating this series at just the right time, didn't we?

[Meg/ED]

We did. And what a wild ride it's been. This is a remarkable time for *Slayers* since, as we mentioned last time, the series is back after a break of almost two decades—but volume 17 is all that's out so far of part 3. Meaning that, like everyone else, we're waiting with bated breath to see what happens next.

[Liz/TL]

Bated breath and, if I might be honest, mild terror in my case—this is an author who likes his mystery reveals and callbacks, and this book came off pretty strongly as scene-setting for mysteries to come.

[Meg/ED]

It's true! We no longer have the privilege of reading ahead.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah. It's easy to say "just translate it faithfully," and that's obviously what we try to do, but English and Japanese are such different languages that if you don't know a bit of foreshadowing is there it can be easy to steamroll it accidentally.

For instance, the scenes where Ran describes how the Dragon Lord spell

works, or where it came from, or what her homeland is like... As I'm translating, I'm trying really carefully to pore over those lines and look for things that could be hiding ambiguities or double meanings, to keep the phrasing in those lines similar. But at the same time, we have to make sure her dialogue sounds natural and, more importantly, funny, because she's a comedic character too. If I knew where the story was going I would know what to play up and what doesn't matter so much, but doing it sight unseen is quite nerve-racking.

Not to mention the stuff with the outer world having its own linguistic distinctions. That stuff could be leading up to pretty much anything in the future, and there'd be no way to anticipate it.

[Meg/ED]

Absolutely. I'm really glad you've mentioned this, because these novels should be effortless to read—but so, so much goes into making that happen. I can't begin to tell you how many hours I've ruminated over seemingly simple word choices. And it's one thing under normal circumstances, but we're in a whole new world in this volume!

(Are we really just south of the barrier? Did we go back in time? Are we in space?! We just don't know yet!)

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, we still know very little about the outer world. By the end of the volume it feels to me like most of the differences we see between the inner and outer lands *could* just be the result of the presence of the hostile Neosfeed faction, but it sorta takes the whole book to unravel that (if that even is the main factor). Personally I spent most of my initial read through speculating about what sorts of things we might see in this new setting, trying to figure out what it is about this world that might be different from the *Slayers* world as we know it.

[Meg/ED]

Ran is a big question for me too. That whole conversation about being suspicious is either going to be the biggest red herring in the history of this

series or the biggest “I told you so” in the history of this series—and I’m on the fence about which.

[Liz/TL]

I’m extremely suspicious of Ran! Lina dismisses her self-accusation based on her belief at the time that “the enemy” is the Luzilte soldiers. But then it turns out those aren’t their main pursuers... and Lina never revisits the hypothesis after learning about Neosfeed. Which is the kind of unreliable narrator mistake that novel-Lina makes a fair amount! Also, Ran laughs like a villain! So that’s my tinfoil hat theory right now. Granted, I’m not sure if Kanzaka would try to pull, “main group member is a secret villain” twice in a row. She could also be a tweener, or exactly what she seems.

[Meg/ED]

I honestly can’t wait to find out. I spent a long time combing through the text for clues I might have missed, and I think *just enough* information has been withheld to make a call. But I’m sure we’ll look back on some part of this book after a couple of volumes and go, “Ah, so *that* was the critical detail!”

Or maybe I’m wrong and Kanzaka will pull the rug out from under us in an all-new way. Part 3 has taken some unusual turns already.

[Liz/TL]

When you think about it, we don’t even have our fourth party member—if we’re even getting a fourth party member.

[Meg/ED]

To come clean, I’m still hurting about Luke and Mileena, so I was actually hoping for a little more healing time with just Lina and Gourry. But I think Kanzaka knew readers might be feeling that way, so Ran being such a question mark is a fun twist

[Liz/TL]

I'm glad we got a whole chapter of just them, at least. From a pacing perspective it's interesting that we don't meet Ran right away. A full quarter of the book is just Lina and Gourry getting settled in in their new... home?

[Meg/ED]

The first chapter of this book has to be one of my favorite in the whole series. I laughed so hard at Nast, the poor bastard.

[Liz/TL]

Poor, evil bastard. He's just trying to do his job!

[Meg/ED]

Did he really screw them over on purpose? Or was it just some kind of cosmic mix-up? So many questions...

[Liz/TL]

True. Lina clearly thinks it was intentional, but if there's one thing we've learned from these books it's that we can't assume we know things just because Lina feels sure about them.

[Meg/ED]

She's got a great intuition and a great head on her shoulders but she has, in fact, been wrong before.

[Liz/TL]

Lina being an unreliable narrator is definitely another thing that makes translating sight unseen a bit nerve-wracking. Plus, the mysterious nature of just about everything else in the story right now.

[Meg/ED]

There is a lot new and frightening for us here, but there's also a lot that was just downright delightful to work on. I have to confess one of my favorite gags in the whole book was the bas(s) stop.

[Liz/TL]

I'm glad that joke came across. In case it's not clear, the Japanese reading of the English words "bus" and "bass" are homophones. When Lina first brings up the map you're supposed to think "bus stop?!" and assume the outer world has some kind of modern-day technology, but then it turns out they're just fish... It's a tricky pun to work around in translation, but I think we got a little bit of a fig leaf from the fact that Lina's struggling to read their alphabet.

[Meg/ED]

It's a fun joke for an even funner ride. The bass ferry is something I'd love to see animated. The whole thing is just an off-the-wall piece of world-building that is both amusing and helps cement the idea that we're not in Kansas anymore.

[Liz/TL]

It's very cute, and I like that it leads to a callback to the walking, talking fish of Lina's world. They were a pretty common running joke in the anime but we sadly didn't see too much of them in the novels.

[Meg/ED]

Speaking of fishy callbacks, I don't think we've seen the "bite-at-every-cast" (proper name pending) spell since volume 1.

[Liz/TL]

Oh, yeah! Plus a little extra explanation of its origins. On that topic, we also

got a couple fun “realism tangents” like explaining why it would be hard to get a world map, or concerns about not poisoning yourself while living off the land in an unknown part of the world. I like the genuine sense in this volume that Lina’s doing her best to remain confident and competent in the middle of a genuinely unknown and pretty hostile place.

[Meg/ED]

She’s melancholy in a way that we’ve never really seen before for moments of this volume, but she’s plucky enough to pick herself up—even if it’s with Gourry’s help. Or maybe even for Gourry’s sake this time. It’s very endearing.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, it makes me excited (despite also being terrified) to see what kind of moods and modes could be coming up. Even though we moved through the earlier novels very quickly, they also all had quite different tones from each other.

[Meg/ED]

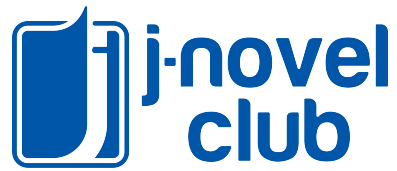
Without a doubt. *Slayers* has always been a fun push and pull between the silly and the serious, and it’s kept that up so artfully that I’m dying to know where we go from here. Maybe it’s too sappy to sign off this way since this is the last volume we have our hands on (FOR NOW!), but this truly has been a wonderful and wild ride. For everyone out there who’s waiting for volume 18, believe us when we say we’re right there with you.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, for the moment there’s no sign of volume 18 coming out any time soon, so who knows when we’ll meet again? Hopefully not too far in the future!

[Meg/ED]

Here’s to the long road [home] ahead of us!



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Slayers: Volume 17

by Hajime Kanzaka

Translated by Elizabeth Ellis Edited by Megan Denton

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